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A preliminary study on food consumption patterns and preferences of school children in Sri Lanka

A.G.S.K. Pushpakumara¹, D.S. Samarawickrama¹, S.A.S. Jayawardana¹, H.M.T. Herath^{1*}
and T. Madhujith²

¹Industrial Technology Institute, 363, Bauddhaloka Mawatha, Colombo 07, Sri Lanka

²Department of Food Science and Technology, Faculty of Agriculture, University of Peradeniya, Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

Information regarding food habits and preferences of school-children is valued in implementing measures for a healthy future generation. The aim of this study was to analyse the food-related habits, food consumption frequencies of the main food groups and preferences towards certain food groups among children and adolescents in Sri Lanka. The study was carried out with 93 adolescents (11–19 years) and 72 children (6–10 years) using a structured, self-administered questionnaire and the data were analysed descriptively. The meals of school children mainly comprised of breakfast, lunch and dinner (>85%) and a considerable number has equal responses to the afternoon snack (~44%) by both groups. The percentage consumption of different food types by adolescents at least once a day varied as follows; fruits 63.5%, green leaves 66.6%, vegetables 92.5%, yams 41.9%, cereals including rice 79.6%, pulses 19.3%, nuts and seeds 9.7%, fish 77.4%, meat 37.6%, milk 66.7%, dairy products 43.0%, and eggs 57.0%. Children had nearly the same consumption pattern with slight deviations in consumption of fruits (77.8%), nuts and seeds (18.0%), meat (27.8%), milk (76.3%), dairy products (52.8%) and eggs (50.0%). Preferences towards lunch packets, bakery products, desserts and snacks were more or less similar for both groups. The most preferred food items during school intervals were rice and curry (71.0%) by adolescents whereas milk rice/ rice and curry (51.4%) by children. Both groups show less preference towards boiled pulses and buns. Children and adolescents preferred buttery flavour and cheesy flavour, respectively as spreads for bread. The highest preferential taste for the snack products was revealed as sweet. The majority of the children (61.1%) and adolescents (51.6%) consumed food from fast-food restaurants less than once a week. Findings highlighted low intakes of pulses, nuts and seeds, yams, meat, dairy products and eggs. This shows the need of introducing healthy meals and healthy snack products for school children.

Keywords: Consumption patterns, food preferences, child and adolescent nutrition

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Email: theja@iti.lk