



A Qualitative Study on the Impact of COVID-19 on Dietary Behaviors in College Students



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BACKGROUND

- Prior to the coronavirus outbreak (COVID-19), many college students reported unhealthy dietary patterns, including low fruit and vegetable consumption and high intakes of processed foods.
- The COVID-19 outbreak was declared a pandemic in March 2020, resulting in universities closing. Students adopted new routines due to the stay-at-home orders, which resulted in changes in dietary behaviors.

OBJECTIVE

This study sought to explore the impact of COVID-19 on college students' dietary behaviors.

METHODS

- **Participants:** This qualitative study utilized a total of 20 individual interviews, which were conducted with college students at a university in the southeastern region of the United States.
- **Study Design and Data Collection:** Semi-structured individual interviews conducted via Zoom were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.
- **Data Analysis:** Changes in dietary habits were identified through content analysis.

CONCLUSIONS

- Information gathered about students' experiences during quarantine can be utilized to create targeted nutrition education focusing on coping mechanisms to decrease unhealthy food consumption and utilization of frozen and canned foods in healthy recipes.

RESULTS

Positive impacts of COVID-19 on college students identified from qualitative interviews

Subtheme	Supporting Quote
Increased consumption of home-cooked meals	"It [COVID-19] made it easier because when I was living at home, my parents were making my meals, so I felt like that made it easier because I wasn't going out and buying unhealthy meals... so with my parents making my meal it's always healthier." [P17]
Decreased consumption of fast food/restaurant food	"I'd say the fact that there are less restaurants open... You can't go and sit in a fast food restaurant and eat junk food because they're just not open for dining on the inside. So things like that were just not available to you because of the restrictions." [P10]
Increased time to cook	"Yeah, I would say since there was more time to be at home, I was able to spend that time towards preparing my meals... that created a lot of space or like new experimentation and creativity that I might not have... I think it created a space for me too, to figure out what I liked like in a way that I had never had because ever since I was in college, like freshman year I lived in a dorm. I wasn't cooking and sophomore year I was fully provided for by my sorority and then when I wasn't there I was at my house and my mom was cooking for me, that was just a new time to begin to figure out what I actually liked and how to implement new things into my diet." [P18]
Increased control over food choices	"When I got to go to the grocery store, I usually went for my family. So that made it easier because I could get exactly what I wanted." [P16]
Increased availability of healthy foods	"I would say it made me start eating a lot healthier than I was last semester just because I had time to try new recipes and buy ingredients and do different things. So I definitely think it helped in my eating habits." [P7] "Yeah, I mean generally just being at home because my mom does the food that my mom keeps in house is on the healthier side" [P15]

Negative impacts of COVID-19 on college students identified from qualitative interviews

Subtheme	Supporting Quote
Increased reliance on canned, frozen, and prepackaged goods	"Frozen food, yes, or things you could freeze, leftovers, and stuff like that just because we are going to the grocery store less. So anything that we could save for later and then reheat, or that would last a long time. That was definitely what I was eating more." [P6]
Barrier to healthy eating due to living with others and lack of peer support	"My family are such meat eaters so every single night it was like 'chicken tonight, burgers tonight, tacos tonight.' And I think that definitely made an impact because there would be some nights where I didn't really want to eat meat... So I think that definitely made an impact there, and especially that was kind of right after I had tried to deliberately start eating meat less." [P8]
Increased boredom snacking	"I mean, I think snacking can sometimes be a way to spend time or take up time so sometimes I struggled with that. I think that's the biggest thing that a lot of people said was hard since you're inside all day and you're just bored. You're like oh, get a snack." [P16]
Increased consumption of unhealthy food items	"We did fast food more during quarantine just because it was the only thing open." [P1]
Limited grocery store accessibility	"Our grocery store was so strict and it was always out of everything.. everything is out of stock, and we have to go to five different places... vegetables and meat were never stocked." [P4]

Table 2. Correlations between dietary intake and total vascular resistance

Funding

Julie O'Sullivan Maillet Research Grant Award
funded by the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics
Foundation (ANDF).