

Original article

Characteristics of vegetarian adolescents in a multiethnic urban population¹

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Abstract

Purpose: To examine the prevalence of adolescents' vegetarianism in a multiethnic, urban population, and its correlates with demographic, personal, weight-related, and behavioral factors.

Methods: Self-report and anthropometric data were collected from a representative sample of 4746 adolescents from 31 public middle schools and high schools in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota. Students answered questions concerning vegetarianism, food and weight, and health behaviors. Height and weight were directly measured. Comparisons were made between self-reported vegetarians and nonvegetarians; these analyses also assessed gender and race/ethnicity interactions. In the second set of analyses, demographic and behavioral characteristics of more restricted and semi-vegetarians were examined. Analyses were done by logistic regression.

Results: Teenage vegetarians comprise about 6% of the sample. The vegetarians were more likely than nonvegetarians to be female, not black, weight- and body-conscious, dissatisfied with their bodies, and involved in a variety of healthy and unhealthy weight control behaviors. Vegetarians more often reported having been told by a physician that they had an eating disorder and were more likely to have contemplated and attempted suicide. Vegetarian males were found to be an especially high risk group for unhealthy weight control practices. Few ethnic group differences among vegetarians were noted. Adolescents who did not eat chicken and fish were at lower risk than those who also ate chicken and fish.

Conclusions: Adolescent vegetarians are at greater risk than others for involvement in unhealthy and extreme weight control behaviors. Vegetarian males are at particularly high risk.

Vegetarianism among adolescents may therefore be a signal for preventive intervention. Adolescents who choose to become «vegetarians» may also need to learn how to healthfully do so.

Author Keywords: Adolescent; «Vegetarian»; Weight control; Health behavior; Body mass index; Ethnicity; Semi-«vegetarians»; Prevention; Gender differences

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