

Attitudes and health behaviours of young adolescent omnivores and vegetarians: A school-based study ☆

L.S. Greene-Finestone^{a, b,  }, M.K. Campbell^c, S.E. Evers^d and I.A. Gutmanis^{e, f}

^aCentre for Chronic Disease, Public Health Agency of Canada, 785 Carling Ave, A.L. 6805A Ottawa, ON Canada K1A 0K9 ^bDepartment of Medicine, University of Ottawa, Canada ^cDepartment of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, University of Western Ontario, Kresge Building, London, Ontario, Canada N6A 5C1 ^dDepartment of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition, University of Guelph, MacDonald Institute, Room 235, Guelph, Ontario, Canada N1G 2W1 ^eUniversity of Western Ontario, Canada ^fEvaluation and Research, Specialized Geriatric Services, St. Joseph's Health Care London, Parkwood Hospital, 801 Commissioners Road East, London, Ontario, Canada N6C 5J1

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Abstract

This study aimed to identify attitudes, health behaviours, social adjustment and self-reported health of vegetarian and omnivore teenagers and determine characteristics independently related to vegetarian status. Participants were 630 Grade 9 students, ages 13–15 years, in seven schools in Ontario, Canada. Vegetarian status was determined using a 19-item food inventory. The vegetarian group included lacto, ovo and/or lacto–ovo and semi-vegetarians. Omnivores consumed red meat at least monthly. Social adjustment factors included school misbehaviour, low academic performance, authority-defying risks and unsafe/illegal risks. Logistic regression estimated the relationship of characteristics to vegetarian status. The sample comprised 25 vegetarians (4%) and 605 omnivores. Analyses focussed mainly on females; 22

vegetarians and 315 omnivores. Dieting behaviours (current, frequent and past year), alcohol use, poorer social adjustment and poorer self-rated health were positively related to vegetarian eating ($p < .05$). Among females (using logistic regression), past year dieting (OR 9.88; 95% CI 2.19–44.47) and alcohol use (OR 2.91; 95% CI 1.02–8.32) predominated in the presence of attitudes that personal health and animal rights are very important. The model predicted 79.9% of cases. Teenage vegetarians were distinctive in health behaviours. The independent, positive association of alcohol use with vegetarian eating is a unique and concerning finding. Dieting behaviours were strongly, independently and positively linked to female vegetarian eating. Further studies with a greater range of behaviours would be useful to more fully characterize teenage vegetarians and explore subgroups.

Keywords: Vegetarian; Omnivore; Adolescent; Health behaviour; Attitude; Alcohol use; Dieting

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Table 1.

Factors associated with dietary status in adolescents: univariable analysis



* Also tested but not significant were marijuana/hashish use, illegal drug use and

attitudes toward the environment and cost of meat.

[†] OR indicates odds ratio. CI denotes confidence interval.

[‡] The unsafe/illegal risk factor is a summation of stealing/shoplifting, taking unsafe walks or car rides and going to dangerous places. The authority-defying risk factor is a summation of doing a risky act on a dare, breaking a rule for a thrill and sneaking out at night. The academic performance variable is a summation of falling behind in schoolwork, incomplete schoolwork and school performance. The school misbehaviour variable is a summation of the following: being sent to the (vice-)principal's office or receiving a detention, suspension or expulsion. Higher scores indicate greater amounts of negative social behaviours.

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Table 2.

Factors associated with vegetarian dietary status in female adolescents: multivariable analysis^{*}



^{*} The criterion for variable entry into the model was fixed at $p < 0.10$. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

[†] OR indicates odds ratio. CI denotes confidence interval.

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