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Dietary patterns and perceptions among South African adults – A cross-sectional study you are what you eat: Fact or fiction

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Introduction: By 2014, globally at least 600 million of a total of 1.9 billion overweight adults were obese and 41 million under the age of 5 years were either overweight or obese.

Methods: A sample of 100 participants with a body mass index (BMI) above 25kg/m² was asked to complete a questionnaire which included socio-demographic data and perceptions about their weight. The study was approved by the Biomedical Research Ethics Committee at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The participants were recruited from a peri-urban general practice situated in the north of Durban, South Africa.

Results: Their ages ranged from 18 to 76 years. 82 percent were females. Almost 71% had a BMI which fell into the Class II and III WHO classification and 25.8% between 18 to 30 years, is either overweight or obese. The results showed that 85.5% were unhappy with their weight with 96.8% knowing that obesity is a health risk and 87.1% recognizing the role of diet in the development of obesity. Fast food intake ($p=0.023$) and vegetable intake ($p=0.026$) per week were

associated with increasing BMI (multiple linear regression, adjusted R square =0.353) while variables such as age, gender, income, educational status, consumption of high fat foods and soft drinks were not statistically significant. The correlation analyses showed a positive correlation (Pearson correlation of .348) between the daily frequency of high fat intake and the number of daily vegetable servings which is statistically significant. A statistically significant negative correlation (Pearson correlation of -.442) between the frequencies of weekly vegetable intake with the daily intake of high fat consumption was observed.

Conclusion: The major drivers of obesity include environmental, behavioral and physiological factors. Thus weight loss intervention programs are complex to implement particularly when they need to be directed at context-specific and social determinants in an under-resourced setting like South Africa where diseases like HIV and TB are being treated simultaneously.

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