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Eating behaviour changes during COVID-19 Pandemic: A review

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Abstract

Eating behaviour is a complex action which gets easily modified by external factors. The recent outbreak of COVID-19 brought about many changes in lifestyle and eating behaviour as preventive measures. Media played an important role in bringing about these changes as media had been providing all the information on COVID-19 constantly. Media whether social, audio, video, print or digital: imparted awareness and educated communities to prevent/ combat the disease. Guidelines by Ministry of Aayush stated that the incorporation of immunity boosters, practicing yoga daily and consuming a balanced diet would help in keeping oneself safe from COVID-19. There was a sudden increase in the consumption of immunity boosters such as *Vitamin C supplements, Zinc supplements, Aayush kadha, Giloy tablets, Papita Ras, Ginger, Tulsi tablets, Haldi, Chawanprash* etc. Information related to these supplements was continuously given on several media platforms. There is no doubt that health related communication benefitted the masses a lot, but the unscientific immunity boosters were contradicted. During pandemic, eating behaviour was not only affected in these terms; but also, where the individuals being confined to home all the time, being isolated, being cut down from outside world altered their dietary practices. Several factors contributed to this like- increased availability of cooking time, increased family time, monotonous routine etc. Not only this, but the continuous news on media platforms, the constant updates on coronavirus affected cases and death cases gave an emotional shock to the population and emotional eating was seen among population. Continuous flow of information and news about the corona cases by media created stress and anxiety among people which further made an influence on their eating habits.

Keywords: COVID-19, dietary habits, eating habits, lifestyle changes, pandemic

Introduction

March 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 outbreak as a global pandemic. This disease was very contagious which could spread from one person to another merely by simple actions such as sneezing, coughing, talking face to face etc. Social distancing, hand washing and wearing face masks became crucial to combat the virus spread.

The first corona positive case was observed on 27th January 2020, in India. Being the second largest populated country in the world, it became very difficult to check the spread of virus, hence the Indian government implemented a 55 days lockdown throughout the country that started on March 25th, 2020 in an effort to reduce the transmission of the virus. About 77% of the eligible population is fully vaccinated in India, the situation still looks manageable, but as the new variants of corona keep coming up, it is important to boost up the immunity for all. According to the guidelines, physical exercises, yoga and building up of immunity are the possible solutions to combat corona virus. Passion for immunity boosters continues to be there among population.

Due to lockdown various changes occurred in the eating habits of the people all around the globe. The changes that occurred in dietary practices were both favorable as well as unfavorable. Quarantine and isolation resulted in overeating. There was lack of proper food supply chain, hence the availability of optimum food items to families was not possible. This in turn resulted in the decline of healthy food consumption. Announcement of lockdown led to hoarding of food in houses; it mainly included the ready to eat food, junk food like chips, cookies, colas etc. and since going out was still not advised, people ended up eating these food items. Problems of weight gain, hypertension, anxiety, sleep disturbances etc. were the result of changed eating/lifestyle practices. Coronavirus not only brought high level of stress among

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masses but also financial insecurities and instabilities and isolation too. It was observed that people started resorting to sweets, fried and fatty food to satisfy their cravings. The food rich in carbohydrate tends to check the stress levels by producing serotonin and due to this it lightens up the mood. Hence, an increase in consumption of carbohydrate rich food was observed. As the lockdown limited the physical activity, researches show increased stress and hence, an increase in the alcohol consumption to combat the stress. Indians are famous for cooking and usually find food as a way to let go the stress within selves. So, when there was lot of negativities around and plenty of time available, in an effort to maintain a positive environment; individuals resorted to overcooking. This overcooking resulted in overeating which increased the probability of getting overweight as well as developing other related lifestyle illnesses.

With the increased screen time, school children got attracted towards the advertisements of junk food on television and other social media platforms. This made them eat a lot of fast-food during pandemic. When the lockdown was lifted, to revive themselves different food outlet came up with many lucrative offers which made people to eat from outside. These were the unfavorable changes that were occurred.

There is another side of mirror also which showed that there were families also which started eating healthy food and cut down on unhealthy food to a great extent. People added immunity boosting food in their diets and decreased the intake of fried food and high sugar food in their diet. There was a drastic decline in the food ordered from restaurants and outside so as to maintain social distancing and to avoid unhealthy eating even after ending up of lockdown. There was an increase in the consumption of organic foods like organic tea, organic pulses, cereals etc. Families started following a regular meal consumption pattern with lot of fresh fruits and vegetables in their diets to strengthen up their immunities. This change in dietary practices was favorable for the health of the families. Information that flowed on all sort of media brought about lot of changes in dietary practices of population around the world.

Review of Literature

Several studies have reported the altered diet and lifestyle behaviours during the COVID-19 period.

Study done by Khandelwal S (2022) [4], stated that there was a fall in 6-10% in the global gross domestic product which would push more people into extreme poverty and malnutrition.

Bennett *et al.* (2021) in their study said that there was an increase in cooking at home and there was a change in dietary habits both favorable and unfavorable.

Ram K *et al.* (2021) [11] stated that lower labour class was the most impacted group during pandemic. States like Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha were the worst affected places facing poverty ranging from 50-80% in the rural areas and 40-70% in urban areas.

According to the study done by Kumar *et al.* (2020) [2], it was found that the diet of many participants was changed or disturbed during pandemic that affects their overall health including mental health.

According to the report published in Journal of Nutrition Epidemiology of Frontier organization (2020) it was stated that there was an increase in late night snacking among people. Snacking mostly consist of energy dense and non-nutrient rich foods.

Study done by Porter *et al.* (2022) [5] revealed that there was

an increase in frequent snacking and emotional eating in the eating pattern of children and adults, in order to relieve boredom. Study done by Singh & Wadhwa (2021) [14] stated a significant improvement in regular meal consumption pattern and healthy eating behavior and reduction in unhealthy food intake.

Mitchell *et al.* (2021) reported that the consumption of fried food was increased by 36.7% and consumption of sweets and sugar added foods were increased by 46.5% during the outbreak of COVID-19, along with increase in stress levels and decreased physical activity. Romeo-Arroyo *et al.* (2020) [10] reported a 50% increase in sweets consumption

Saxena and Limbad (2021) [13] stated that there was an increase in the consumption of organic food during the pandemic. Study done by Motrico *et al.* (2021) [7] it was stated that there was an increase in intake of snacks and in the preference for sweets and ultra-processed food rather than fruits, vegetables and fresh food in addition with the increase in alcohol consumption also.

According to the report by Ministry of Aayush (2021) it was seen that the consumption of ayurvedic medicines/products was increased during corona with the Indian Medicines Pharmaceuticals Corporation limited (IMPCL), a government enterprise and manufacturer of ayurvedic and unani medicines. Hira Shakoor *et al.* (2021) in their study said that Nutrition is a key determinant of maintaining good health. Key dietary supplements such as vitamin C, D, E, Zinc, selenium and omega 3 fatty acids have well-established immune modulatory effects with benefits in this infectious disease. An online survey by ICMR (2022) reported that there was a high consumption of Vitamin C rich fruits as well as Vitamin C and Zinc supplements by adult Indians to boost immunity during the second wave of COVID-19.

Discussion

Corona has had a great impact on every aspect of human life. It is proved that the fear of this deadly virus and restrictions on individual's freedom have worsened the load of stress and altered the lifestyle and eating patterns of individuals worldwide. Due to lockdown, when people were confined to the walls of their houses, a drastic change in eating pattern was observed. There was an increase in the consumption of carbohydrates, fats and processed food which in turn resulted in the weight gain and obesity among population. The stressful environment during corona also resulted in increased symptoms like hypertension, hyperglycemia, hypercholesterolemia etc. These symptoms could possibly lead to lifestyle diseases in future. Corona brought forth a blend of its effects. While corona has wreaked havoc impact all over the world, there is a silver line also like increased frequency in home cooking, increased bonding between families, in-corporation of immunity boosters in diet, encouraging physical exercises, importance of food security hence less wastage of food. People have started adapting healthy life style and proper routine in their lives. People have now started taking their health more seriously. Though the impact which corona caused on physical, mental, social and economic status of people is irreversible, yet it has left few lessons to be learnt as far as diet and lifestyle is concerned. The main findings provided information about a shift towards modified eating behaviours, illustrated by an increased snack frequency and a preference for sweets as well as ready to eat processed foods rather than fruits, vegetables and fresh food. An increased alcohol consumption was found among different countries, as the prevailing physical and psychological factors

played an important role. Consequently, adherence to healthy diets decreased. It is pertinent strategize future policies with an aim to evaluate nutrition and altered food intakes during such distressing situations.

Indians: A Review, 2021.

Conclusion

The effect of COVID-19 pandemic has both negatively and positively impacted dietary practices throughout globally, and negative diet habits were associated with other poor lifestyle outcomes including weight gain, mental health issues, increased alcohol consumption, and limited physical activity. Such practices, if sustained in the long term, may have significant impact on the health of the people. Although the changes in dietary pattern of people during pandemic is known but the exact outcomes of these changes will show after few years. As the situation is now becoming near normal again, it has become necessary to promote healthy habits among population.

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