

Topic Area: Other

Abstract Title

International students' perceptions of healthy eating before and after arrival in Canada: A qualitative study.

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Abstract

Introduction: International student numbers in Canada are increasing with many students planning to reside in Canada after graduation. However, the health of this population tends to decline with time spent in Canada, leading to higher rates of chronic disease. Previous research suggests that international students perceive their traditional diet as healthier compared to that available in North America. There is a gap in the literature exploring the meaning of healthy eating to international students, both in their country of origin and in Canada.

Objectives: To explore international students': (1) perceptions of a healthy diet in their country of origin;(2) perceptions of a healthy diet in Canada; and ,(3) how their perception of a healthy diet has changed since their arrival in Canada.

Methods: A qualitative descriptive design was used where in-depth, one-on-one interviews were conducted with 13 international students at UPEI. The interviews were transcribed from audio recordings and analyzed using thematic analysis.

Results: Nine key themes were identified: Preference for traditional foods and meals, associating traditional foods with healthy eating, the transition from familial to individual cooking practices, reading labels on processed foods, distrust of the food supply, discovering non-traditional foods, traditional food availability in Canada, reliance on convenience foods, and changing views of healthy eating.

Conclusions: International students coming to Canada have unique experiences with food due to a change in way of life, a lack of social ties, and a new food culture.

Significance to the Field of Dietetics: There is increased interest in research of international students' nutrition and health transitions due to the vulnerability of this subpopulation and the impact of the "healthy immigrant effect" on the health system. Researchers, policymakers, and dietitians will benefit from increased research in this area to support evidence-based, culturally appropriate nutrition interventions.