



## **Health Consciousness and Fast Foods: A Study among College Students in Lunglei Town, Mizoram**

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### ***Abstract***

*Fast foods are popular among young generation due to modernisation and globalisation. Fast foods are quick, reasonably priced, and readily available alternatives to home cooked food. Fast foods containing high level of sugar and fat are unhealthy and addiction to fast foods would lead to obesity and other human diseases. This article is aimed at understanding the health consciousness of the college students about fast foods in Lunglei town in Mizoram, a small state in North East India. The data were collected by administering a structured questionnaire from the sample of 150 college students. The sample was drawn equally from three colleges in Lunglei town. Only around 23 per cent of the respondents were conscious about their health while consuming fast foods. It is also found that as customers, the college students under the study were not taking the required precaution in knowing the product information while buying junk foods and instant foods. This article suggests the health organisations, NGOs, and educational institutions have a responsibility to create more awareness among the people about the adverse impact of consumption of fast foods on health through public relations, publicity, and public service campaigns. Further, there is a need to create more awareness among the customers about the importance of reading product information like nutritional value, ingredients, expiry date, health claims etc. is required to ensure healthy eating habits.*

**Keywords:** *College Students, Fast Foods, Health Consciousness, Instant Foods, Junk Foods, Product Information.*

### **Introduction**

Fast foods are quick, reasonably priced, and readily available alternatives to home cooked food. Fast food is defined as a pre-packed meal, ready to eat food/convenience food

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(Harrison and Marske, 2005; Periera et al., 2005). The primary characteristic of fast food is that it is ready made in nature and easy to eat. Fast foods are mostly designed for ready availability, use and consumption. The fast food products are distinguished from others in function of the following characteristics: being low priced, served quickly, usually eaten with the hands, easily packaged, and having a short shelf life(Price 1997).The terms fast food and junk food are often used interchangeably. Most of the junk foods are fast foods as they are prepared and served fast, but not all fast foods are junk foods, especially when they are prepared with nutritious contents (Kaushik et al., 2011). The concept of fast foods has different meanings depending on the context, situation and culture. It has many definitions in the literature.

Fast food culture is an emerging trend among the younger generation. The ready availability, taste, low cost, marketing strategies and peer pressure make them popular with children and adolescents (Kaushik et al., 2011). Consuming fast foods has become a recent trend among upper society, teenagers and youth have also increased and the fast food has won the palate of those groups (Ahmed et al., 2008).

Food diversity in India is an implicit characteristic of India's diversified culture consisting of different regions and states within. Traditionally, Indians like to have home-cooked meals – a concept supported religiously as well as individually. However, with times due to increasing awareness and influence of western culture, there is a slight shift in food consumption patterns among urban Indian families. It started with eating outside and moved on to accepting a wide variety of delicacies from world over.

Mizoram has a total area of 21,078 square kilometres. It is situated between Myanmar and Bangladesh and has a strategic significance geographically and politically. The Mizo people follow Christianity as their religion. The religion and the culture of Mizo people have an impact on their food habits. Mizo people are also influenced by fast food culture and fast food restaurants have been increasing in number in the state. Different varieties of fast foods are available in these restaurants. The local restaurants provide fast foods of different kinds such as chow, rice, soup, rolls, beverage, burgers, and so on. Mizo people consume junk foods and instant foods which are available from shops. Some of the popular brands of junk foods which are very commonly available in Mizoram include *Lays, Kurkure, Coca Cola, Fanta, Sprite, Frooti and Appy*. Among children and college students in Mizoram, it is a habit of consuming instant foods especially noodles such as *Maggi, Wai Wai and Rum Pum*. Junk foods and instant foods are available in nook and corner all over the state.

A good number of studies have been carried out highlighting the health hazards as a consequence of consumption of fast foods. Fast foods have high level of fat and sugars that are not only unhealthy but addictive and that creates a vicious cycle making it hard for children to choose healthy food. High content of trans-fat in commercially available fast foods predispose children to risk of future heart diseases. Energy density of fast food is more than twice the recommended daily allowance for children. Fast food intake leads to higher proportion of calories being derived from total and saturated fat (Kaushik et al., 2011).

Increased fast food consumption can affect health because it has been linked to a diet that is “high in calories, saturated fat, sugar, and sodium, as well as body fatness, weight gain, and increased body mass index”. These nutritional components coupled with a sedentary lifestyle could lead to health problems (Dingman et al., 2014).

Consumption of fast food among children in the United States seems to have an adverse effect on dietary quality in ways that plausibly could increase risk for obesity (Bowman et al., 2011). Consumption of junk food amongst urban school going adolescents in Jorhat district of Assam is highly prevalent. General awareness about ill effects of junk food amongst the adolescent was average which warrant appropriate public health interventions (Sahu and Das, 2018).

### **Objective and Methodology**

This article is aimed at understanding the health consciousness about fast foods among college students in Lunglei town, Mizoram. For the purpose of the study, primary data were collected by administering a structured questionnaire among the sample students of the three colleges in Lunglei town, in Mizoram. The survey was conducted during July–August, 2016 which was confined to the college students in Lunglei town who consume fast foods at least four times in a week. For the purpose of the study, fast foods include fast foods available from college canteen and other restaurants, junk foods and instant foods. The sample consisted of a total of 150 college students. The sample was drawn equally from three colleges in Lunglei town, by selecting 50 students from each of the colleges. The equal number of male (25) and female (25) respondents were selected from each of the colleges by using the quota sampling method. Quota sampling was used to give equal representation to each gender from each of the colleges. The questionnaires were administered to the respondents in the college campus. Secondary data were collected from journals, newspapers, books, and websites. The simple percentage is used to analyse the primary data collected.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### ***Health consciousness while consuming fast foods***

An attempt is made to know whether the respondents were health conscious while consuming fast foods. Table 1 indicates the health consciousness of the respondents while consuming fast foods available from college canteen and other restaurants.

Over 42% of the respondents were not conscious of the health hazards as a consequence of fast foods consumption and only about 23% of the respondents were conscious about it. One-third of the respondents were not sure about its impact on health. In other words, more than 76% of the respondents were not conscious about their health while consuming fast foods available from college canteen and other restaurants.

Interestingly, there is a difference between male and female respondents in terms of health consciousness. Among the male respondents, 44% were not conscious about their health while consuming fast foods while over 30% conscious about their health. Among female respondents, over 41% were not conscious about their health while over 16% were

conscious about their health while consuming fast foods. Gender-wise, male respondents (30.67%) were more conscious about their health than female respondents (16.22%). It may be inferred that though the college students are educated, only about 24% of them were conscious about the health implications of consumptions of fast foods. Unfortunately, only over 16% of female students were conscious about their health while consuming fast foods. Though Mizoram is having 91.58% of literacy rate in 2011 Census, a vast majority of population are not graduates which may imply a high degree of unconsciousness about the impact of fast foods consumption on health.

Table 1: Are you conscious about your health while consuming fast foods?

Gender	Yes	No	Can't Say	Total
Male	23 (30.67)	33 (44.00)	19 (25.33)	75
Female	12 (16.22)	31 (41.89)	31 (41.90)	74
Total	35 (23.48)	64 (42.95)	50 (33.56)	149

*Note:* 1. Figures in parentheses are percentages. 2. One female respondent is not in a habit of consuming fast foods available from restaurants even though she likes to consume junk foods and instant foods.

(Source: Field study)

#### ***Health problem faced after consumption of fast foods***

Table 2 shows the numbers of respondents facing health problems after consuming fast foods in college canteen and other restaurants.

Table 2: Have you ever faced any health problem after eating fast foods?

Gender	Yes	No	Can't Say	Total
Male	6 (8.00)	56 (74.67)	13 (17.33)	75
Female	19 (25.67)	41 (55.41)	14 (18.92)	74
Total	25 (16.78)	97 (65.10)	27 (18.12)	149

*Note:* Figures in parentheses are percentages

(Source: Field study)

Over 74% of male respondents did not face any health problem after consuming fast foods. 8% of male respondents were facing some health problem after eating fast foods. Over 17% of male respondents were not sure about this. Among female respondents, around 55% did not face any health problem after consuming fast foods. Over 25% of the female respondents faced some health problem after consuming fast foods and over 18% of female respondents were not sure about this. Overall, around 65% of the respondents did not face any health problem. Around 16% of the respondents were facing some health problem and

around 18% of the respondents could not say about whether they faced health problem or not after eating fast foods. It may be observed that one-fourth of the female respondents have complained about ill-effects of fast foods consumption on their health. Such respondents were only 8% among the male respondents.

***Habit of reading product information on the packets before buying junk foods***

Junk foods are energy dense foods with high sugar/fat/salt content and low nutrient value in terms of protein, fibre, vitamin and mineral content (Kaushik et al 2011). In the interest of customers, the Government of India had made it obligatory to furnish specific information on the packages of food products. According to FSSAI, every packaged food article for the domestic use has to be labelled in accordance to the related Indian Food Law i.e. Food Safety and Standards (Packaging and Labelling) Regulations, 2011. Product information like nutritional values, ingredients, its manufacturer, expiry date, health claims etc. should be displayed by the manufacturer on the packet of the product. In this connection, it is attempted in the field study to know whether the respondents were in a habit of reading such information while buying the junk food items. Table 3 indicates the habit of reading product information on the packets of junk foods namely contents, date of manufacturing, expiry date etc.

Table 3: Are you in a habit of reading product information on the packet of junk foods before buying it?

Gender	Sometimes	Regularly	Never	Total
Male	54 (72.97)	9 (12.16)	11 (14.86)	74
Female	51 (68.00)	11 (14.67)	13 (17.33)	75
Total	105 (70.47)	20 (13.42)	24 (16.11)	149

*Note:* Figures in parentheses are percentages. One male respondent is not in a habit of taking junk foods.

(Source: Field study)

Over 86% of the respondents were not in the habit of reading the product information relating to junk foods on a regular basis. However, over 70% of the respondents read it sometimes. In other words, only about 13% of the respondents were in the habit of reading product information related to junk food items. Though the college students are educated and understand English language without difficulty, only about 13% of the respondents were in the habit of reading product information on a regular basis. But the consuming public includes a large number of customers who cannot read the English and such customers might be consuming junk food items without having a proper knowledge of the contents of the products, expiry date and the health risk involved.

### ***Habit of reading product information on the packets of instant foods***

Instant foods are foods that are ready to be served once dissolved or dispersed in a liquid with low cooking time (Kaushik et al., 2011). As noted above, every packaged food article for the domestic use has to be labelled in accordance to the related Indian Food Law i.e. Food Safety and Standards (Packaging and Labelling) Regulations, 2011, notified by Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI). With the rise of problems and diseases associated with poor eating habits, people are increasingly reading the information printed on food packaging labels. In this connection, it is attempted to know whether the respondents are in the habit of reading product information while buying instant foods. Table 4 displays the particulars regarding the habit of reading product information on the packets of instant foods.

Table 4: Are you in the habit of reading product information on the packets of instant foods?

Gender	Sometimes	Regularly	Never	Total
Male	58 (79.45)	7 (9.95)	7 (9.95)	72
Female	52 (68.00)	13 (17.33)	11 (14.67)	75
Total	109 (74.15)	20 (13.61)	18 (12.24)	147

*Note:* Figures in parentheses are percentages. Three male respondents were not in a habit of instant foods.

(Source: Field study)

Only over 13% of the respondents were in the habit of reading product information relating to instant food items. Over 86% of the respondents were not in the habit of reading product information relating to instant food items on a regular basis. However, over 74% of the respondents read it sometimes.

Gender-wise, over 17% of female respondents and over 9% of male respondents were in the habit of reading product information related to instant food items. It may be noted that female respondents were more habitual in reading product information than their male counterparts. In comparison to junk foods and instant foods, no significance difference is found between the junk foods and instant foods in this regard as over 13% of the respondents were in the habit of reading product information related to junk food items and instant food items each. Further, it may be noted that female respondents were habitual more in reading product information related to instant food items than junk foods.

### ***Health problems faced after eating instant foods***

Table 5 shows whether the respondents were facing health problem or not after consuming instant foods. Nearly 7% of the respondents were of the opinion that it affected their health after eating instant foods. Over 27% were not sure of it. Over 65% of the respondents have not reported any health problem. In case of fast foods, over 16% of the respondents were facing some health problems after eating fast foods. But in case of instant

foods, only around 6% of the respondents were facing such health problems. It may be noted that the respondents were facing some health problems more after eating fast foods than instant foods. The government of India had laid down the rules and regulations for enterprises involving the production of packages food items to the safety of consumers. At the same time, the government of Mizoram especially the health department, the educational institutions have to discharge their responsibility in making the canteens and restaurants provide healthy foods in hygienic atmosphere by giving due importance for preparation of food items by using good quality ingredients and edible oil.

Table 5: In your experience, have you ever faced any health problem after eating instant foods?

Gender	Yes	No	Can't Say	Total
Male	3 (4.17)	46 (63.89)	23 (32.39)	72
Female	7 (9.33)	50 (66.67)	18 (24.00)	75
Total	10 (6.80)	96 (65.31)	41 (27.89)	147

Note: Figures in parentheses are percentages

(Source: Field study)

### ***Issue of banning Maggi noodles in the year 2015***

*Maggi* is an international brand of seasonings, instant soups, and noodles that originated in Switzerland. The brand was acquired by Nestle in 1947. *Maggi* commanded a market share of around 75 per cent prior to the five-month ban in 2015. Nestle India's instant noodles brand *Maggi*, whose sales were severely hit by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) ban in 2015, has now cornered close to 60 percent market share (Business Standard 2017).

In May 2015, Food Safety Regulators from Barabanki, a district in Uttar Pradesh reported that samples of *Maggi* 2 Minute Noodles had unexpectedly high levels of monosodium glutamate, as well as up to 17 times the permissible limit of lead. This finding led to multiple market withdrawals and investigations in India and beyond. On 6th June, 2015, the Central Government of India banned nationwide sales of *Maggi* noodles for an indefinite period. Due to the issue of banning *Maggi* noodles in India during June-August, 2015, Nestle India, which follows a January-December financial year, reported decline of 17.2% in its net sales for the year ended December, 2015. Net profit for the year fell to Rs. 563crore, from Rs. 1,185 crore in the previous year. Subsequently, in August, tests performed by the US health regulator FDA showed no dangerous lead levels in the products. On 13 August 2015, the nationwide ban was struck down by the Bombay High Court.

In this connection, it is attempted in the field study to know whether the respondents were aware of the issue of banning *Maggi* noodles. Table 6 shows the number of college students who were aware and not aware of the issue of banning *Maggi* noodles in the year of

2015. Nearly 79% of respondents were aware of the issue of banning *Maggi* noodles in the year of 2015. Only about 13% of the respondents were not aware of the issue of banning *Maggi* Noodles. Only about 9% of the respondents were not conscious about this issue.

Table 6: Are you aware of the issue of banning *Maggi* Noodles in the year 2015?

Gender	Yes	No	Can't Say	Total
Male	53 (73.61)	12 (16.67)	7 (9.72)	72
Female	63 (84.00)	7 (9.33)	5 (6.67)	75
Total	116 (78.91)	19 (12.93)	12 (8.16)	147

Note: Figures in parentheses are percentages. Three male respondents were not in the habit of consuming instant foods, hence they were not covered

(Source: Field study)

Among male respondents, over 73% were aware of issue of banning *Maggi* noodles in 2015. Over 16% of male respondents were not aware of the issue of banning *Maggi* noodles. Only around 9% of male respondents were not conscious about this issue. Among female respondents, 84% were aware of the issue regarding banning *Maggi* noodles in 2015. Over 9% of female respondents did not know about this issue. Only around 6% of female respondents were not conscious about the issue of banning *Maggi* Noodles in 2015. Overall analysis indicates that female respondents (84%) were more aware of the issue of banning *Maggi* noodles than their male counterparts (73%).

In connection of *Maggi* noodles issue, the respondents were asked whether they stopped buying *Maggi* noodles after the issue of controversy. Table 7 indicates the number of respondents who have stopped or not stopped buying *Maggi* noodles on health grounds after knowing the issue of banning *Maggi* noodles.

Table 7: Have you stopped buying *Maggi* noodles after the controversy?

Gender	Yes	No	Can't Say	Total
Male	28 (38.89)	29 (40.27)	15 (20.83)	72
Female	26 (34.67)	39 (52.00)	10 (13.33)	75
Total	54 (36.73)	68 (46.26)	25 (17.01)	147

(Source: Field study)

Over 36 % of the respondents were stopped buying *Maggi* noodles on health grounds after knowing the issue of banning *Maggi* noodles. Over 46% of the respondents were not stopped buying *Maggi* noodles after knowing the issue. Only around 20% of the respondents were not sure of it.



In overall analysis, Over 38% male respondents were stopped buying *Maggi* noodles on the health grounds after knowing the issue while over 34% of female respondents did the same. No significance difference between male and female in this regard. 52% of female respondents were not stopped buying *Maggi* noodles after knowing its issue and over 40% of male respondents were also not stopped buying it. It may be noticed that female respondents like *Maggi* noodles more than male respondents and did not bother about their health.

## **Conclusion**

The study revealed that over 16% of the respondents were facing health problem after consuming fast foods. Consumption of fast foods might not cause health problems promptly. However, Fast foods are often high in energy and fat and also often contain a significant amount of saturated fat, cholesterol, and sodium (Brown et al., 1998; Paeratakul et al., 2003), and frequent consumption of fast food meals may lead to the overconsumption of calories, saturated fat, sugar, and sodium, weight gain, and obesity (Rosenheck, 2008). Overconsumption of fast foods can lead to further complications such as diabetes, which is a chronic disease and is associated with other health problems such as heart disease, stroke, kidney failure, and diabetes (Stefanik, 2013). The present study indicated that three-fourth respondents were not conscious about their health while consuming fast foods. Besides, the study found that male respondents were more conscious about their health than their female counterparts. In this regard, female education is more important as they tend to cook fast foods as part of their daily habits. Eventually, that would affect their health as well as the health of other family members. Over 86% of the respondents were aware of banning *Maggi* noodles in 2015. However, only around 36% of the respondents were stop buying *Maggi* noodles. This indicated that almost two-third of the respondents were not conscious about their health regarding *Maggi* noodles which were banned due to high level of its containing monosodium glutamate and lead.

Reading of food labels increased awareness in health due to the nutritional information provided as a result the customers were more health conscious and that reflected in their eating habits (Kempen et al., 2012). Although the college students are capable of reading and understanding English language, the study also revealed that more than three-fourth respondents were not in a habit of reading product information in the packet of junk foods and instant foods. Individual consumers need to be more aware and educated about their individual dietary needs, and devise their dietary strategies for food choice according to their health (Abraham et al., 2018). The study suggested that the health organisation, educational institutions and NGOs have responsibility to give awareness through public relations, publicity and public service campaigns regarding the adverse impact of frequent consumption of fast foods on health and read the product information to know the nutrient contents, manufacturing date, and expiry date of the products to ensure the healthy eating habits. Further, the government of India had laid down the rules and regulations for enterprises involving the production of packages food items to the safety of consumers. At the same time, the government of Mizoram especially the health department, the educational institutions have to discharge their responsibility in making the canteens and restaurants

provide healthy foods in hygienic atmosphere by giving due importance for preparation of food items by using good quality ingredients and edible oil.

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