Evaluating ROTC Cadets Nutritional Competency, Dietary Habits, and Overall Health

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ABSTRACT

Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) cadets regularly have highly stressful and physically demanding training, making adequate nutritional knowledge and eating habits essential for optimal health and physical performance. However, there is limited work looking at the ROTC cadet's nutritional knowledge, dietary patterns, and perceived health. **PURPOSE**: This study aimed to investigate ROTC cadets' nutrition knowledge and perceived health. **METHODS**: Cross-sectional data were obtained from 174 ROTC cadets regarding nutritional knowledge and self-reported health via validated paper-based questionnaires, including the Perceived Barriers to Healthy Eating and a General Sports Nutrition Questionnaire. The questionnaire data were analyzed using SPSS version 29 software. Categorical data are reported as frequencies (n) and total percentages. A chi-square analysis was also used to determine independence ($p < 0.05$) between ethnic groups. **RESULTS**: Cadets were asked to report how healthy they had been over the last 12 months: 8 (4.6%) said very healthy, 77 (44.3%) said healthy, 54 (31.0%) said neutral, 31 (17.8%) said unhealthy, and 2 (1.1%) said very unhealthy. The majority of cadets successfully identified the following foods as "high in protein": Chicken, 160 (91.9%); Kidney beans, 129 (74.1%); Tuna, 155 (89.0%); eggs, 156 (89.7%); and peanut butter, 143 (82.1%). As well, the majority successfully identified the following foods as "high in carbohydrates": Pasta, 163 (93.7%); bread, 143 (82.2%); and candy, 100 (57.5%). When asked for "areas of improvement" cadets reported wanting to eat more fruits (124, 71.2%), fish (93, 53.4%), and vegetables (109, 62.6%) with 103 (59.2%) wanting to eat less sweets. Lastly, the chi-squared analysis showed no significant associations between ethnic groups ($p < 0.05$) as it pertains to nutritional knowledge, self-reported health, and willingness to improve eating behaviors. **CONCLUSION**: The ROTC cadets appear to have moderate knowledge of the macronutrient content of common foods and a desire to improve certain eating habits. These data may help to identify eating habits of ROTC cadets and potential areas for improvement and interventions.