SELF-EFFICACY & HEALTH HABITS IN COLLEGE-AGE ADULTS
Sara Haberlein- BSN, RN, MSN Student, Marquette University, Milwaukee, 262-424-3160, sara.haberlein@marquette.edu; Leah Taugher- BSN, RN, MSN Student, Marquette University, Milwaukee, 262-347-6278; Jenna Speltz, BS Student Marquette University, Milwaukee; jenna.speltz@marquette.edu; Robert Topp- PhD, RN, Associate Dean of Research, Marquette University, Milwaukee, 414-288-3811, robert.topp@marquette.edu
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Background & Significance: College years are commonly associated with weight gain in young adults. While in college, students adopt health habits that likely persist throughout their adult life. Thus, college years are a “teachable moment” in which students can be introduced to healthy habits. Prior to developing interventions to encourage adoption of healthy habits the physical fitness and nutritional intake of college students needs to be described.
Purpose: To examine the relationships between measures of physical fitness, dietary intake, and self-efficacy for exercise and healthy diet among college-age students.
Framework: Previous authors have identified the critical importance of self-efficacy when encouraging positive health behaviors. Thus, it is hypothesized college students who report a higher self-efficacy will also exhibit better physical fitness and healthy nutritional intake.
Sample Description/Population: A sample of full-time undergraduate students, ages 17-21 years (19.04±1.13 years) were recruited from a single health and wellness course and campus fliers. A total of 72 students participated in the study including 48 students recruited from the course. This sample consisted of 54 (75%) females, 18 (25%) males, 35 (48.6%) freshman, 11 (15.3%) sophomores, 17 (23.6%) juniors, 9 (12.5%) seniors, and 62.5% of the sample residing in campus dormitories with the unrestricted meal plan.
Setting: This project took place on the Marquette University campus.
Method/Design & Procedure: This correlational study involved two cohorts of undergraduate students recruited during Fall 2012 & Fall 2013 by trained research assistants. Assessments of physical fitness included measures of body composition, aerobic capacity, muscle strength, muscle endurance and flexibility. Nutritional intake was derived from two consecutive daily diet recall interviews, averaged and translated into nutrient intake using the U.S. Dept or Agriculture MyPlate website (http://www.choosemyplate.gov/). Self-efficacy was assessed using a self-report cantrel ladder for confidence to engage in exercise or eating a healthy diet.
Results/Outcomes: From the sample, the BMI range was from 17.3 to 29.17 with the average BMI being 22.7. Pearson correlation coefficients indicated a significance (p<.01) positive relationship between exercise self-efficacy and the following fitness measures: pushups, sit-ups, aerobic capacity, and sit and reach flexibility. Self-efficacy for eating a healthy diet was found to be significantly positively correlated with protein, fiber, calcium, and iron intake.
Conclusion: These findings are consistent with the theoretical framework in which self-efficacy for exercise and consuming a healthy diet are positively correlated with higher levels of physical fitness and healthier levels of dietary intake, respectively. Practitioners may wish to develop interventions designed to improve self-efficacy for exercise and healthy nutritional intake in order to address the emerging problem of obesity among college age students.