

Gender differences in factors influencing dietary patterns among Irish children and adolescents

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Gender differences in dietary behaviours are widely reported in the research literature⁽¹⁾. Numerous studies conducted in Europe have reported that boys consume fewer fruits and vegetables, more high-fat foods and more soft drinks than girls^(2,3). However, till date, little research has examined how factors influencing dietary behaviours differ among boys and girls. The present study examined gender differences in the factors related to dietary patterns among Irish children and adolescents. The population included 483 young people aged between 9 and 18 years from 25 randomly selected primary and secondary schools in the West of Ireland. Survey data and anthropometric data were collected from participants. Dietary intake was assessed with a comprehensive food frequency questionnaire, and individual and social factors hypothesised to be potential predictors of dietary intake were assessed with a questionnaire completed by young people.

Exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis were conducted to identify dietary patterns in the study population. Two dietary patterns were identified labelled a 'healthy diet' and an 'unhealthy diet'. The 'healthy diet' was characterised by high intakes of fruit, vegetables, brown bread and yoghurt and the 'unhealthy diet' was characterised by high intakes of pizza, chips, red meat, processed meat, confectionary, desserts, snacks and high-energy drinks. Structural equation modelling was used for model testing to investigate the relationship between individual and social factors and dietary patterns among young people.

For the overall sample, the findings indicated that self-efficacy beliefs to make healthy food choices and parent support for healthy eating were significant predictors of a healthy dietary pattern. Parent support for unhealthy eating and peer support for unhealthy eating were significant predictors of an unhealthy dietary pattern. The model for the overall sample explained 27% of the variance in the healthy dietary pattern and 19% of the variance in the unhealthy dietary pattern. Multigroup analysis was conducted to examine whether models for boys and girls were statistically significant. For girls, parent support for unhealthy eating was a significant predictor of an unhealthy dietary pattern, whereas, for boys, peer support for unhealthy was a significant predictor of an unhealthy dietary pattern. Future research should consider how factors influence dietary patterns differentially in boys and girls. Findings have implications for parental and peer involvement in interventions to enhance the diet of children and adolescents.

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