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Breakfast habits, student attentiveness and associated factors among second-year undergraduates at the University of Jaffna

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Background and objective: Skipping breakfast is common among undergraduates and can lead to gastric irritation, fatigue, inattentiveness, and ultimately poor cognitive performance. This study investigated breakfast habits, student attentiveness and associated factors among second-year undergraduates of the University of Jaffna.

Methods: A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted among second-year students of four faculties (Medicine, Science, Arts, and Allied Health Sciences) of the University of Jaffna. Stratified random sampling was used to ensure proportionate representation from the four faculties. Data were collected by directly issued self-administered questionnaires (August-September 2024). Student attentiveness was measured with a composite score based on 15 statements (min 15, max 75); a lower score indicated higher attentiveness. Data were analyzed using SPSS v21. Independent t-tests, one-way ANOVA and chi-square tests were used to determine the factors associated with breakfast habits and student attentiveness (significance level 0.05).

Results: In total, 329 students participated (response rate 100%). Most participants were females (58.1%); 69.6% were Tamil, 20.7% Sinhala, and 9.7% Muslim; 54.7% were boarded and 31.9% stayed at home. In the sample, 66% (n=218) reported usually having breakfast; in the prior three days, 43.6% (n=139) had breakfast on all three days, 20.7% on two days (n=66), and 35.7% (n=114) once or not at all. Among those who usually consumed breakfast, 28.3% reported inadequate, 28.8% adequate, 14.8% excess and 27.9% a mixed intake of starch. Sex (p=0.001), place of residence (p=0.016), and living with parents (p=0.001) were associated with breakfast consumption; females, student residing at home, and those living with parents were more likely to usually have breakfast. Mean attentiveness score was 34.1 (SD 18.0); it differed significantly between those who usually had breakfast (mean 30.8, SD 8.4) and those who did not (mean 40.8, SD 12.7; p=0.001).

Conclusion: Second-year undergraduates at the University of Jaffna who had breakfast recorded higher attentiveness scores than those who did not. Health promotion efforts should raise awareness about the relationship between breakfast habits and attentiveness and also ensure the availability of healthy breakfast options at hostels and faculties. Potential confounders like sleep quality and stress levels need further exploration in nationally representative samples.

Keywords: breakfast habits, cognitive performance, attentiveness, undergraduates, Jaffna