Nutritional knowledge, behaviors, & perceptions among Jews in the United States

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**Introduction**

There is a lack of research regarding nutrition knowledge, behaviors, and perceptions among Jews in the United States. Understanding how religious values influence health is important for identifying and understanding health risks, conditions, and outcomes.

Jews have a specific way they eat and consume foods, specifically adhering to the Jewish Dietary Laws or laws of Kashrut. Additionally, the Jewish way of living celebrates food and involves food in ritual and practice, especially in the Sabbath and Jewish holidays.

This study determined the level of nutrition knowledge of Jewish adults and analyzed food behaviors and perceptions of the Jewish population within the United States as it pertains to health. This study aims to create cultural awareness to assist registered dietitians on providing sufficient nutritional services to Jewish patients.

**Purpose of Study**

In order to decrease prevalence of chronic diseases and to promote adequate nutrition within the Jewish population in the United States, this study investigated knowledge, behaviors, and perceptions of nutrition among Jews in America.

This study quantitatively investigated nutrition knowledge by religiosity, specifically the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform affiliations, and also explored eating behaviors. This study qualitatively examined the relationship between the Jewish faith and its impact on nutritional choices and behaviors. Additionally, this study investigated factors that influence food choices, how food is characterized, and how the media affects understanding of nutrition.

**Hypotheses & Research Questions**

Ho1: There is no significant difference in mean nutrition knowledge score by religious affiliation (Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform).

Ho2, 4, 6, and 8: there is no significant difference between average frequency intake of nutrient (dietary fat, protein, carbohydrate, and added sugars) reported by religious affiliation (Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform).

Ho3, 5, 7, and 9 stated that there would be no significant difference between average frequency intake of nutrient (dietary fat, protein, carbohydrate, and added sugars) reported by kosher status.

**Research Questions**

1. Is there a relationship between Jewish beliefs and nutritional choices and behaviors?
2. What factors influence food choices among Jews in the United States?
3. How do Jews in the United States characterize food groups and specific foods?
4. How does the media influence understanding of nutrition among Jews in the United States?

**Data Analyses**

**Quantitative Data**

Hypothesis 1 = ANOVA
Hypotheses 3, 5, 7, and 9 = Two-Independent Sample T-Tests
Hypotheses 2, 4, 6, and 8 = ANOVA

**Qualitative Data**

Themes were constructed from qualitative interview data & triangulated with past research.

**Quantitative Results**

Hypothesis 1 = SIG @ p = 0.039 (using p ≤ 0.05).
Hypothesis 4 = SIG @ p = 0.064 (using p ≤ 0.01).
Hypothesis 5 = SIG @ p = 0.06 (using p ≤ 0.01).

**Methods**

- Mixed Methods
- Recruitment via social media & non-random snowball sampling technique
- Quantitative data via survey which included demographic and religiosity questions, a nutrition quiz, and a FFQ.
- Qualitative data via semi-structured phone interviews.

**Qualitative Results**

15 participants were interviewed, 11 Orthodox Jews, 2 Conservative Jews, and 2 Reform Jews. Participants ranged in age from 26 to 84 years and the majority were female (n=12) and keep Kosher (n=10).

- Provided insight on nutritional behaviors and perceptions among American Jews.
- Revealed how the Sabbath and Jewish holidays and Jewish dietary laws influence eating behaviors.
- Varying factors that influenced food choice such as societal pressure, the desire to modify eating habits, and preconceived notions of foods.
- Participants classified food and food groups into categories such as “good” and “bad” and labeled them based on their healthiness.
- Disclosed how the media negatively influences body image and reinforces the notion that “thinner is better.”

**Conclusion**

- Considering Conservative Jews made up 11.7% of the sample, they scored higher on the nutrition quiz compared to Orthodox and Reform Jews.
- Participants who keep kosher ate more protein and Orthodox participants ate more protein, both of which relate to interview themes.
- Participants related their experiences to overeating at weekly Sabbath and Jewish holiday meals.
- Majority labeled protein as “important.”
- Most participants believed that the Sabbath, Jewish holidays, and Jewish rituals affected their diet.
- Negative, uncontrollable eating opportunities such as overeating and eating unhealthy items.
- Kosher status was a limiting factor for purchasing food whereas it limited the purchase and consumption of unhealthy foods.
- Some believed that maintaining a healthy diet can strengthen their religious values, other disagreed.

This study demonstrated that Jewish individuals within the United States are no different. Jewish citizens are exposed to the same types of foods as the rest of the population. Although Jews may eat differently due to the Jewish dietary laws, nonetheless, they are exposed to the same nutritional inadequacies that exist in the United States.

This study provided a brief understanding of the relationship Jews have with food and nutrition. Food is ingrained in Jewish culture, acting in celebration and in ritual. Nutrition has a place in Judaism, regarded as a Jewish value, taught in ancient Jewish teachings, and inherent in the Jewish dietary laws.

**Clinical Significance:**

This study provided the foundation for exploring nutritional or other health-related problems within this cohort. Additionally, this study established a basis for healthcare providers and registered dietitians to create intervention strategies, nutrition education, and solutions to adequately represent this specific group.

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