Journal of Nutrition and Food Security
Shahid Sadoughi University of Medical Sciences
School of Public Health
Department of Nutrition
Nutrition & Food Security Research Center

eISSN: 2476-7425 pISSN: 2476-7417 JNFS 2023; 8(2): 155-157 Website: jnfs.ssu.ac.ir

The Need for Revision of Food Literacy Policies in Iranian Universities during COVID-19: Solutions from the Scientific Evidence

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ARTICLE INFO

EDITORIAL ARTICLE

Article history:
Received: 27 Oct 2021
Revised:9 Jan 2022
Accepted: 17 Jan 2022

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The World Health Organization, defines health literacy as cognitive and social skills increasing the motivation and ability of individuals to acquire information to promote and maintain their health (Tugut *et al.*, 2021). Nowadays, food literacy, as a subset of health literacy are receiving serious attention worldwide (Vamos *et al.*, 2021). Food literacy has been defined as a vital element in improving food insecurity and increasing food knowledge and skills with the aim of improving healthy eating behavior, which leads to reducing food hygiene inequalities (Steils and Obaidalahe, 2020).

The role of food literacy in improving food quality, and in the prevention and treatment of many chronic and contagious diseases is clear to all, but with the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic, attention to food literacy knowledge and skills has become more important. The importance of food literacy is due to fact that unhealthy food style can weaken the immune system and increase the risk of respiratory infectious diseases (Charlebois *et al.*, 2021).

Scientific evidence also suggests that having food literacy has potential effects on controlling the epidemic and the consequences of COVID-19 . Food literacy improves individual's health by increasing proper nutritional skills (West *et al.*, 2020). Consumption of a healthy diet also has protective effects on the immune system and health consequences during the COVID-19 epidemic (Nguyen *et al.*, 2021).

The importance of this issue is such that the research group of the National Institutes of Health of the USA has developed a program to prevent and combat COVID-19 disease for 2020-2030, with the aim of increasing food literacy (Begley *et al.*, 2019).

This paper should be cited as: Bamir M, Farahbakhsh S, Daneshi S , Sadeghi R, Jafari H. ***The Need for Revision of Food Literacy Policies in Iranian Universities during COVID-19: Solutions from the Scientific Evidence.*** *Journal of Nutrition and Food Security (JNFS)*, 2023; 8(2): 155-157.

[Downloaded from jnfs.ssu.ac.ir on 2024-10-12]
[DOR: 20.1001.1.24767417.2023.8.2.2.0]
[DOI: 10.18502/jnfs.v8i2.12588]

Researches in Iran have shown that the issue of nutrition of students in Iranian universities and taking the necessary measures to teach a healthy diet should be given serious attention by authorities and policy makers (Zamanian *et al.*, 2013). Outsourcing and privatization of students nutrition led to a reducing control measures of food quality by universities and rising student food prices. This factor resulted in more consumption of snacks and fast food among Iranian university students (Baghi Nejad Gork, 2018). In regard to lack of high food literacy and the impact of this style of nutrition on the prevalence of the diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, hypertension, and various types of cancer (Baghi Nejad Gork, 2018), there is a need to promote food literacy in Iranian universities. Evidence shows that people with the underlying diseases are more vulnerable to COVID-19 (Kang, 2020).

Therefore, it is essential to determin the risk factors and protective factors that affect food quality and food literacy assessment during an epidemic for identifying appropriate public health responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. As food illiteracy is increasing in Iranian universities and there is no plan to reverse it, we are looking for solutions using related keywords in various reputable global databases. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to provide solutions to solve the problem of food literacy promotion in Iranian universities based on scientific evidence. There are some solutions such as developing a curriculum following the characteristics and components of food literacy for students to increase the knowledge and necessary skills to have a healthy diet, nutrition and skills training programs as a food literacy intervention, and empowering students to access, understand, evaluate, and learn the use of healthy diet information through the university website during the epidemic. It can be very helpful to set up a university-based health promotion program that provides up-to-date scientific results and recommendations from nutritionists and to create a credible and reliable questionnaire to evaluate food literacy of students.

Authors' contributions

All authors designed the study, reviewed the literature, collected the data, organized the information, developed the draft, formatted the manuscript, and read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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[DOR: 20.1001.1.24767417.2023.8.2.2.0]

[DOI: 10.18502/jnfs.v8i2.12588]

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[Downloaded from jnfs.ssu.ac.ir on 2024-10-12]

[DOR: 20.1001.1.24767417.2023.8.2.2.0]

[DOI: 10.18502/jnfs.v8i2.12588]