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Evaluation of Nutrition Education Needs of High School Cheerleaders

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Youth sports and athletics play a critical role in adolescent education and development. Despite the evolution of athletic training methods and equipment available to adolescent athletes, a lack of nutrition education for these athletes remains an issue. The purpose of this project was to assess the need for nutrition education for adolescent female cheerleading athletes and develop an education intervention to address the findings of the assessment.

Twenty female cheerleaders from a local high school completed the assessment survey. Results of the assessment indicated female adolescent athletes lack knowledge about general nutrition, as it relates to their sports performance, and basic nutrition information. Although participants stated they consumed pre/post workout snacks, they were unaware if what they were consuming was appropriate. Participants also stated they frequently consumed fast food, with 30% stating they ate fast food five or more times per week. Sources of nutrition information were varied with 47% getting the majority of their nutrition information from family, 45% from the internet and 30% from friends. Additionally, no respondents stated they had worked with a registered dietitian to meet nutrition needs. Respondents indicated a desire for more information regarding foods to eat for enhanced performance, the impact of pre/post workout snacks, maintaining weight, and healthy food options.

An educational intervention was designed to address the findings of the assessment. The educational intervention included a 20-minute lesson on the importance and function of macronutrients in athletic performance. A recipe demonstration and food tasting were conducted with the lesson. Seventeen cheerleaders participated in the educational intervention. Non-formal evaluation of the educational intervention showed that most of the participants were able to provide examples of healthy and unhealthy carbohydrate options and able to explain the importance of macronutrients in physical activity. Furthermore, all participants were able to recall a fact related to proper nutrition for pre/post workout. Overall, the participants were receptive to nutrition education and actively participated in the lesson.

Future programs designed for this audience should include healthy options when dining out, how to prepare and consume foods that meet energy needs for athletes, and how to identify reputable sources for nutrition and health information.