Features of a Mediterranean Diet and Mental Health Outcomes in College Students

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ABSTRACT

Up to 30% of college students are reported to suffer from depression or anxiety. Previous studies have produced correlations between nutritional variables and mental health outcomes in adults. Specifically, variables featured in the Mediterranean diet, including increased fiber, monounsaturated fat, omega-3 fatty acids, fruit and vegetable intake, and decreased added sugars have been associated with more favorable mental health outcomes. **PURPOSE:** This research was conducted to explore relationships between specific variables included in the Mediterranean diet and mental health symptoms in college students. **METHODS:** To collect data on diets, participants were given three-day diet records to record food and beverage intake. Participants completed an online survey including multiple standardized mental health questionnaires including the Beck Depression Inventory, Profile of Mood States (POMS), and Zung Anxiety Scale. The three-day diet records were inputted into Food Processor software to examine exact nutritional status. The mental health questionnaires were scored according to the test instructions. The data was then entered into SPSS for further statistical analysis. **RESULTS:** A statistically significant correlation was found between increased grams of omega-3 fatty acids and a decreased level of depression according to the Beck Depression Inventory –(r=-0.337, p=0.025). Another significant correlation was found between greater total grams of added sugar and lower depression on the Beck Depression Inventory (r=-0.328, p=0.030). There were no significant correlations found with depression, anxiety, or mood and other nutrition variables such as monounsaturated fat, fiber, and fruit and vegetable intake. **CONCLUSION:** Examining the correlations in this study to highlight specific aspects of the Mediterranean diet, high intake of omega-3 fatty acids and added sugars are the strongest predicting factors to favorable mental health status.