

Self-Reported Dietary Habits and Barriers Among First Responders

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ABSTRACT

Firefighters (FFs) and law enforcement officers (LEOs) have a high, lifestyle-related, risk for health conditions such as cardiovascular disease (CVD). Nutritional intervention has been identified as a critical area to improve these risk factors. However, there are limited data regarding the dietary habits and barriers of FFs and LEOs. **PURPOSE:** This study aimed to investigate the dietary habits of first responders and the factors or barriers influencing them. **METHODS:** Cross-sectional data were obtained from 21 first responders regarding nutritional habits, factors, and barriers via validated paper-based questionnaires which include; the Perceived Barriers to Healthy Eating, Food Choice Questionnaire, and Rapid Eating Assessment for Participants - Short Version. The questionnaire data were analyzed using SPSS version 29 software. Shapiro-Wilk Test was used to assess normality for all continuous variables. Categorical data are reported as frequencies (n) and total percentages. A chi-square analysis was also used to determine independence ($p < 0.05$) between the groups. **RESULTS:** A total of 21 FFs (n=7) and LEOs (n=13) (age = 37.7±2.1; height = 180.8±1.4 cm; weight = 94.3±2.1 kg) completed the questionnaires. Commonly reported barriers to healthy eating included busy lifestyles (n=18, 85.7%), irregular working hours (n=12, 61.9%), cost (n=8, 38.09%), and willpower (n=10, 47.6%). Overall, 17 (80.9%) of the respondents placed importance on consuming nutritious food, and 9 (42.8%) placed high importance on having easily accessible food options; 18 (85.7%) emphasized the importance of high protein content, yet 9 (42.8%) followed a high protein diet, while 11 (52.3%) did not follow any particular diet, and 15 (71.4%) reported a willingness to change their eating habits to be healthier. The chi-square analysis revealed no significant differences between groups. **CONCLUSION:** The cohort of FFs and LEOs appear to be knowledgeable regarding what food to consume and value healthy eating. However, busy lifestyles, irregular shift work, cost of food, and willpower are perceived barriers that may challenge first responders when practicing good dietary behaviors, despite the majority expressing the willingness to change their current dietary habits to healthier ones. On the whole, these data provide insight into the barriers experienced by first responders and may aid in further investigation of the implementation of healthy eating strategies in these populations.