

# Factors that Influence Dietetic Interns' Dietary Practices

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## Background

The dietetic internship is a rigorous supervised practice experience that all future registered dietitians must complete [1]. Research suggests that environmental and social factors may affect dietary choices [2]. No studies have assessed if the rigorous internship experience affects interns' dietary practices. The objective of this focus group research study was to gather opinions from various dietetic interns to understand what factors of the internship experience, if any, affected their dietary habits.

## Methods

Candidates were recruited across the United States through an email distributed by dietetic internship directors. Participants who were currently completing or had completed their dietetic internship within the past six months attended one of seven virtual focus groups. Transcriptions. Transcripts were separately coded by two to three trained researchers using methods outlined by Krueger and Casey to identify major and minor themes [3]. Researchers discussed any disagreements in coding and established a consensus.

## References

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## Results

Participants' (N=42; ages 20-40 years) represented 23 US states and territories. Most (95%) were female. Major and minor themes of factors that affected interns' dietary intake are seen in Table 1. The majority of participant comments suggested a decline in dietary habits due to these factors. However, many interns indicated that there was an overall improvement or no change in their diet.

Table 1. Summary Of Themes

Major Themes	
<b>Time</b>	"I also did say that I find myself doing what my preceptors are doing, so if my preceptor is taking a lunch every day, great. If they're eating at their desk, that's also what I'm doing."
<b>Finances</b>	"It's kind of difficult to be health conscious on a limited budget."
<b>Access/Availability</b>	"I don't have an oven. I have a mini-fridge. And I'm used to like meal prepping on Sundays. And so then, I can just like grab and go, but I don't even have space to meal prep."
<b>Mental Load</b>	"There's a lot of effort to like, like y'all said, to cook a meal. Like who wants to do that? Especially after food service rotation? Nobody, nobody!"
Minor Theme	
<b>Social Influence</b>	"I was in the eating disorder clinic. We were eating with everyone. It was like a group partial hospitalization, so we were eating with the group, and so I made sure that whatever I had was balanced so and... but also included things that, you know, like a little piece of chocolate or just included a variety of foods."

## Discussion

The issue of limited time impacting dietary habits appeared in previous research among adolescents and college students [4-6]. Research also confirmed the influence of financial constraints on diet patterns among the college student population, as 15-25% of college students were found to be food insecure or at-risk for food insecurity [7]. Regarding COVID-19 research has been conducted on the impact it has had on diet quality/intake, but there is a lack of existing research on the impact that COVID-19 has had on access to the space or environment to eat in the workplace [8]. The impact of mental load, including stress and burnout, parallels previous research regarding the link between stress and diet. College students with higher stress levels were at an increased risk for high intake of sugary snacks, fast food, frozen meals, and carbohydrate-rich items compared to those who reported lower stress [9-11]. Some interns relocated to complete their internship, while others lived at home with family. A study of female dietetic students in Japan found that those who lived away from home were less likely to meet their nutrient needs [12]. This was similar to the focus group's expression of dietary changes.

## Conclusion

Finances, access/availability, mental load, time, and social influences impacted interns' diets. Dietetic internship programs and preceptors should explore ways to minimize the potential negative impacts of these factors on interns' dietary habits.