

# The impact of COVID-19 on dietary and lifestyle behaviours in a sample of Irish higher education students

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The COVID-19 pandemic may have potentially impacted the diet and lifestyle behaviours of vulnerable groups like higher education students<sup>(1)</sup>. Recent studies found that health behaviours such as diet, physical activity, sleep, and alcohol consumption changed during lockdowns affecting the physical and mental health of students<sup>(2,3)</sup>. Other studies found differing results, dependent on location, lockdown restrictions and cultural differences<sup>(4)</sup>. The purpose of this study was to examine the self-reported impact of Covid-19 on diet and lifestyle behaviours, in a sample of Irish higher education students.

Data was collected as part of a cross-sectional web-based survey, hosted by Qualtrics®XM in the 2020–2021 academic year, during varying stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Registered full-time students, aged 18 and over, from three institutes in North-West Ireland were eligible to participate. Self-reported information was collected in relation to demographics. A similar question was asked about the impact of COVID-19, adapted from previous research<sup>(3)</sup> relating to diet, sleep, stress, physical activity, and alcohol use: “Has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your alcohol intake/ sleeping patterns/ stress levels/ physical activity levels/ dietary intake?”. Answers were given on a similar 4-point Likert scale e.g. ‘Yes - I drink more,’ ‘Yes - I drink less,’ ‘no,’ and ‘unsure’. SPSS was used to conduct a descriptive statistical analysis and presented as Number (%) or Mean ± Standard Deviation.

A total of 682 completed responses were recorded. The mean age was  $24.97 \pm 8.90$  and most students were female ( $n = 455$ , 66.8%), in first year ( $n = 208$ , 30.6%), and science students ( $n = 312$ , 46.6%). When asked about the impact of COVID-19 on dietary behaviours 29.5% ( $n = 195$ ) reported that their diet is less healthy and 26.4% ( $n = 174$ ) reported eating more healthily while 37.9% ( $n = 257$ ) reported cooking or preparing fresh food more often and 15.8% ( $n = 107$ ) did not. Almost half ( $n = 332$ , 48.8%) of students reported drinking less and 11.7% ( $n = 80$ ) consume more alcohol than usual. Sleep was negatively impacted in 39.0% ( $n = 266$ ) of students with only 14.1% ( $n = 96$ ) reporting better quality sleep. Most students ( $n = 411$ , 62.1%) feel more stressed than usual, with few ( $n = 57$ , 8.6%) reporting that they are feeling less stressed. Finally, 54.8% ( $n = 372$ ) of students reported being less physically active with 25.2% ( $n = 171$ ) reporting being more active than usual.

This research found that students attending the institutes in the North-West of Ireland were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, feeling more stressed, reporting poorer sleep quality, and less participation in physical activity. However dietary habits did not seem to be as negatively impacted and alcohol consumption was improved, as self-reported by students. These results indicate the self-reported impacts of a global pandemic and lockdown restrictions on health behaviours in this cohort.

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