



Why do some women of low socioeconomic position eat better than others?

Findings from the SESAW study

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A healthy diet is one of the most important factors in protecting against chronic diseases such as overweight and obesity, cardiovascular disease, some cancers and osteoporosis^{1,2}. Specifically, the Australian Guide to Healthy Eating recommends adults eat two serves of fruit and five serves of vegetables each day, and that they avoid foods high in fat, salt and sugar such as 'fast foods'³.

Unfortunately, many Australians, particularly those experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, do not eat a healthy diet⁴. Understanding the factors that influence eating behaviour is therefore an important step in developing effective strategies for promoting healthy eating.

This study examined the factors that predict fruit, vegetable and fast food consumption among women from varying socioeconomic backgrounds. In particular, it examined the characteristics of women who, despite experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, appear 'resilient' to poor eating behaviours – that is they manage to consume fruits and vegetables frequently and to limit consumption of fast food.

Some women appear 'resilient' to poor eating behaviours – that is, they consume fruits and vegetables frequently and limit consumption of fast food, despite their socioeconomic disadvantage.

Study design and methods

This cross-sectional study examined the eating behaviours of 1,567 women from 45 neighbourhoods of varying socioeconomic status in metropolitan Melbourne. The women completed a postal survey with questions relating to their weight status and dietary behaviours. They reported their education level (less than 12 years, 12 years or equivalent, or more than 12 years), which was used as an indicator of socioeconomic position. The survey also explored potential individual, social and environmental influences on the women's eating behaviours.

'Resilience' to poor dietary behaviours was defined as consuming: two or more serves of fruit/day; three or more serves of vegetables/day; and fast foods less than once/week.

Fruit, vegetable and fast food consumption among women

Overall, the study showed a large proportion of women were not eating the levels of fruit and vegetables recommended in the Australian Guide to Healthy Eating. Forty percent consumed fewer than two serves of fruit per day and 95% consumed fewer than five serves of vegetables per day. One in five women consumed fast food more than once per week.

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Comparisons among women of various socioeconomic levels

There were no differences in fast food consumption between socioeconomic groups. However, fewer women of low socioeconomic position consumed adequate serves of fruit (54% in the lowest group compared to 65% in the highest group).

The same was true for vegetable consumption, with 30% of women in the lowest socioeconomic group consuming three or more vegetables per day compared with 41% in the highest group.

What factors make women resilient to poor eating behaviours?

While women experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage generally tend to have poorer diets than other women, some eat well and are resilient to the risks posed by disadvantage. The analysis sought to identify which individual, social and environmental factors contribute to this resilience.

Resilience to poor eating behaviours is associated with:

- food preparation and cooking skills;
- support from family members;
- availability of fruit and vegetables.

Individual factors

Compared to non-resilient women, resilient women reported:

- having higher confidence for eating a healthy diet and avoiding fast food in a range of challenging situations;
- having a personal preference for fruit and vegetables;
- having the skills for preparation and cooking of healthy foods; and
- using meal planning strategies such as making a shopping list.

These findings point to the significant potential of nutrition promotion strategies targeting individual-level factors such as food preparation and cooking skills.

Programs targeting such skills may also improve women's confidence to eat a healthy diet.

Interestingly, nutrition knowledge did not differ between resilient and non-resilient women in the sample. It is possible that many women are aware of the benefits of high fruit and vegetable consumption and low fast food consumption, and hence a more detailed knowledge of nutrition is not needed to support these behaviours.

Social factors

Compared to non-resilient women, resilient women tended to:

- have greater support for healthy eating from family members and friends; and
- be less influenced in their food choices by other social factors such as the food preferences of other family members (e.g. children).

These findings point to the potential value of strategies that target women as well as their families. For example, involving children and partners in food preparation and cooking may encourage them to support women's healthy food choices.

Environmental factors

Compared to non-resilient women, resilient women were:

- less likely to report cost as a barrier to purchasing fruit and vegetables; and
- were also more likely to report that fruit and vegetables were readily available in their neighbourhood.

Where to from here?

The findings from this study suggest that a poor diet is not an inevitable consequence of socioeconomic disadvantage, and that a significant proportion of women of low socioeconomic position manage to consume a healthy diet.

The study highlights several important factors that may support resilience in these women, at an individual, social and environmental level. These factors can usefully inform the development of targeted nutrition promotion strategies aimed at improving diet amongst less resilient socioeconomically disadvantaged women.

References

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