

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Differences in the food group consumption among university students in Sarawak during the COVID-19 Movement Control Order: A cross-sectional study

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Abstract

Introduction: The COVID-19 Movement Control Order (MCO) has caused a concern on the food consumption among university students. This study aimed to assess food diversity and its relationship with accommodation among university students in Sarawak.

Methods: This cross-sectional study was conducted among students of the University Malaysia Sarawak in Kota Samarahan during the MCO. Data on socio-demographic characteristics and food diversity were collected using an online questionnaire.

Results: A total of 478 respondents participated in this study. The majority of the respondents were women (77.4%), and almost half were Malays (49.6%). Half of the respondents stayed at home with their family, while 36.4% stayed in their college dormitories. Except for legumes, nuts and seeds and milk and milk products, all other food groups were common in the respondents' diet, with the highest consumption observed from cereal and cereal products, followed by meat and meat products and water. One-way ANOVA showed that there were significant differences in the intake of fish and seafood; legumes, nuts and seeds; milk and milk products; and fruits between those who stayed in college dormitories, at home with their families and in rented houses ($P < 0.01$).

Conclusion: Despite reduction in food availability and accessibility, the total energy intake of the university students did not change. University students should be continuously educated on the importance of a balanced diet consisting of all food groups.

Introduction

COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered strain of novel coronavirus that is highly contagious and can easily spread via small respiratory droplets produced by an infected person while coughing or sneezing.¹ A person with COVID-19 can manifest symptoms ranging from mild to severe respiratory symptoms. Groups with a higher susceptibility to COVID-19 include persons with underlying medical illnesses and those aged over 60 years.² Hence, prevention of the spread of the disease is of utmost importance during the pandemic to flatten the disease curve.

On 31 March 2020, the United Nations stated that COVID-19 endangered the food supply chain globally, and this situation was estimated to deteriorate further in April and

May. The food supply, together with safe and adequate access to food, had become the major concern of the general population during the lockdown period. Further, concerns regarding essential needs also intensified among the general population albeit most supermarkets and grocery stores remained open. Market shelves were cleared when the Movement Control Order (MCO) was announced by the government of several countries, thus creating a perception of food shortage for consumers. Additionally, the increasing trend of home cooking had caused the demand for fresh food items to be remarkably high at local markets and supermarkets.³

A similar situation was observed in Malaysia. One of the greatest efforts that had been taken by the Malaysian government in halting