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Evaluating The Association Between Ultra-Processed Food Consumption, Dietary Intake, And Obesity Among Malaysian Youth

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Introduction:

The rising prevalence of obesity among Malaysian adults, particularly in university settings, demands a critical evaluation of dietary determinants. While ultra-processed foods (UPF) are global drivers of weight gain, their specific impact on the nutritional profiles of college students in Southeast Asia remains under-researched. This study aimed to investigate the association between UPF consumption, comprehensive dietary intake, and the risk of overweight and obesity among university students.

Methods:

A cross-sectional study was conducted among students at UiTM Puncak Alam. Dietary intake was assessed using a two-day 24-hour dietary recall and a specialized Food Frequency Questionnaire for UPFs. Comparative analyses were performed between normal-weight and overweight/obese (OW/OB) groups to identify nutritional disparities.

Results:

No statistically significant association was found between UPF consumption and the risk of overweight or obesity in this cohort. However, the OW/OB group exhibited significantly higher intakes of total energy, protein, and fat compared to the normal weight (NW) group. Significant differences were also observed in the intake of micronutrients, including potassium, calcium, iron, folate, and fiber. In contrast, no significant variations were found for carbohydrate, sodium, sugar, or vitamin D intake.

Conclusion:

Although UPF consumption was relatively low among the participants, higher energy and macronutrient density were major correlates of obesity. These findings suggest that obesity prevention strategies in university populations should focus on broad dietary awareness and caloric management rather than UPF restriction alone.