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Food for thought: building resilient students through healthy dietary habits

University students seeking new ways to overcome challenges may have to look no further than the breakfast table. New research from the University of Newcastle suggests a healthy diet is associated with lower risk of psychological distress and increased resilience (the ability to recover from stress).

Presented today at the [Dietitians Association of Australia 36th National Conference](#) on the Gold Coast, this research reveals a connection between mental health and common dietary habits of Australian university students.

Researcher and Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) Dr Amanda Patterson found more than a third (37%) of the 2710 students surveyed reported high or very high risk of psychological distress, and 30% reported having low resilience. This was associated with lower fruit and vegetable intakes, lower frequency of breakfast consumption and higher consumption of soft drinks and takeaway foods.

“In general, an unhealthy diet has been consistently linked with poorer mental health. However, the association between lower risk of psychological distress and higher resilience with healthier food choices was an interesting discovery. Students reporting better mental health had higher fruit and vegetable consumption, were more likely to start their day with breakfast and consumed soft drinks and takeaway foods less frequently,” said Dr Patterson.

Previous research has uncovered that university students are under more stress than their peers not currently studying¹. This stress has also been associated with unhealthy lifestyle behaviours including poor diet and inadequate exercise, smoking and increased alcohol consumption.

“University is often a time of change for students, and many experience a range of psychological stressors, stemming from academic, social, financial and economic factors. For many students, adult eating behaviours are also developed during this time, influencing their life-long health,” said Dr Patterson.

Researchers are keen to understand more about the relationship between diet and psychological distress in students.

“These findings suggest food and nutrition habits may have the power to positively impact mental health among students – and, with further exploration could help to inform university health education programs.”

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For further information or to organise an interview with Dr Amanda Patterson, APD contact DAA: Pattie King: 0409 661 920 or Trish Kirkland: 0459 491 545



MEDIA RELEASE

Background

About the Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA) National Conference:

The DAA National Conference is being held from 12-14 August 2019 at the Gold Coast Conference and Exhibition Centre. For more information and program details, visit: daa2019.com.au. Follow the conversation via twitter [@DAA_Feed](https://twitter.com/DAA_Feed) and share your interest using #DAA2019.

Press passes can be made available for interested media (including Australian-based journalists) to attend sessions at the conference. To request a press pass, please contact Pattie King 0409 661 920.

¹Stallman, H.M. (2010), Psychological distress in university students: A comparison with general population data. *Australian Psychologist*, 45: 249-257. doi:[10.1080/00050067.2010.482109](https://doi.org/10.1080/00050067.2010.482109)

Note to Editors: The Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA) is the professional body representing dietitians nationally. Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) is the only national credential recognised by the Australian Government, Medicare, the Department of Veteran Affairs and most private health funds as the quality standard for nutrition and dietetics services in Australia. For more information visit www.daa.asn.au. Voice of Dietitians section on the DAA website contains DAA's media releases and position on topical nutrition issues in the media.