

# Nutrition of Children in Roma Community

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Original Article

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## Abstract:

**Objective:** The aim of the research is to determine eating habits of Roma children in a selected Roma community and to identify behavioural factors that affect them.

**Design:** Descriptive study.

**Participants:** Sample consisted of 86 children from a selected Roma community.

**Methods:** A questionnaire aimed at detecting eating habits and practice of children from a Roma community. Data processing through descriptive statistics.

**Results:** The results show that 80% of the children involved in the research think that they eat healthily because they consume fruits, vegetables, meat and potatoes. In the families, fruits, vegetables and legumes are represented in the diet in lower percentages. In dietary behavior, we identified an influence of TV advertising on children's food choice in 70% of the respondents.

**Conclusion:** The results of our research suggest that there is a need to expand the work of health education assistants in Roma communities as well as in schools.

## Introduction

Nutrition is an important factor for a child's development and growth. A recent trend in nutrition has been a reduction in energy intake, a reduction in fats, sugars and table salt. In practice, this means increased consumption of fruits, vegetables, legumes, cereal and whole grain products (6). Unfavorable indicators of the health and lifestyle of Roma children have their origin and cause in the families. Such as in the majority population, in the Roma minority also applies that the family has the primary formative and identification impact on shaping child's personality. In Roma families, socio-economic opportunities and stereotypes are manifested mainly in the consumption of unhealthy foods. A consumption of cheap fat meat, animal and vegetable fats, sweets and sweetened beverages with a high content of simple carbohydrates is high. A consumption of fruits, vegetables, milk and dairy products is low. From the point of view of healthy nutrition, especially in children, a low consumption of fish, eggs, legumes and vegetables is a significantly unfavorable indicator, when these important food components are replaced by bread and sweets (8).

In order to address overweight and obesity in children and young people in general, it is necessary to address the issue of marketing of foods high in fat, sugar and salt, specifically for these age groups (WHO). While adults may recognize when they are being a target of advertisements, children and young people do not necessarily distinguish between advertisements and cartoons. Children are particularly receptive and represent an easily influenceable target group in terms of negative advertising supporting development of unhealthy dietary preferences (1). The aim of our research is to determine eating habits of Roma children in a selected Roma community and to identify behavioral factors that affect them. We focused on the description of the consumption of fruits, vegetables, dairy and meat products. We were also interested in whether parents buy food promoted in advertisements to their children.

## Methodology

The research sample group consisted of 86 Roma pupils, grades 5 to 9, from 2 elementary schools located in the part of the city of Kosice with an increased concentration of Roma inhabitants. The group was a purposive convenience sample. As a method of data collection, we chose a questionnaire of our own design, in which we focused on the identification of nutritional habits of the addressed children and socio-demographic variables. To evaluate the data, descriptive statistics methods in SPSS 25.0 program were used.

## Results

The research sample consisted of 86 Roma pupils. Of the total number of respondents, there were 51 (59%) boys and 35 (41%) girls. The age variable was not determined. Due to the size of the sample, analyses of gender differences in the eating habits of the respondents were not performed. Table 1 presents the findings in the area of subjective evaluation of healthy eating by the respondents.

To compare the findings presented in Table 1, in Table 2 we present the findings from the question on the composition of their school midmorning snacks.

**Table 1** Respondents' evaluation of their own diet (n= 86)

Do you think that you eat healthy?	n	%
Yes, because I eat fruits, vegetables and dairy products	25	29
Yes, because I eat healthy foods	12	14
Yes, because I eat potatoes, meat, soup	32	37
No, I don't eat healthy	17	20

**Table 2** A composition of respondents' school midmorning snacks (n= 86)

For a school midmorning snack you have:	n	%
Fruits	12	14
Crisps	11	13
Bread with butter and smoked meat products	53	62
Biscuits	8	9
I do not have any midmorning snack at school	2	2

### Behavioral factors of nutritional habits of Roma children

Table 3 presents the findings related to the respondents' nutrition. Respondents generally consume fruits and vegetables, as well as milk and dairy products, which we can evaluate positively. From the analysis of the item finding which fruits the interviewed children prefer, we found that they prefer bananas (30%) and oranges (17%). Of the fruit typical of our climate zone, a total of 41% of children chose apples, pears and plums. Interviewed children should limit the consumption of sweets, meat and smoked meat products. In the question on what their family prefers in their diet, we found that it was meat in 30 (35%); potatoes in 20 (26%); pasta in 12 (14%). In the families, fruits, vegetables and legumes are represented in the diet in lower percentages. The analysis shows that unhealthy composition of a diet is preferred in the families of the respondents. The results correspond with the scientific knowledge about the primary formative and identification impact of the family in shaping the child's eating habits.

**Table 3** Frequency of respondents' consumption of recommended nutritional components (n = 86)

Consumption	Fruits	Vegetables	Dairy products and milk	Meat and smoked meat products	Sweets
daily	45	32	46	24	46
2-3 times / week	41	27	34	33	15
Once a week	0	14	0	26	25
never	0	13	6	3	0

Among the priority areas and measures of the National Action Plan in the prevention of obesity for the years 2015–2025 (7) is included: Restriction of marketing and advertising for children and youth. One of the priorities is to limit children's exposure to advertisements of food/ drinks high in fat, sugar and salt. In Table 4, we present the findings resulting from the question focused on the effect of the advertising on parents' shopping behavior in the area of their children's nutrition.

**Table 4** Respondents' consumption of food based on advertising

Consumption of food based on advertising	n	%
Yes, they will definitely buy them for me	27	31
Yes, but they only buy them for me sometimes	24	28
Yes, but they won't buy them for me	9	11
I don't like the advertised products	7	8
I do not watch advertisements	19	22

### Discussion and Conclusion

The choice of lifestyle remains a responsibility of an individual. It can be supported by: family background; work environment; economic accessibility; health promotion campaigns (2). Family's financial income, which affects the quality and nutritional composition of food, can also be considered a risk factor for children's nutrition in the Roma community. People on low incomes, with low level of education, with insuf-

ficient level of health literacy and the unemployed have greater problem to adhere to a healthy diet. These groups of the population show an occurrence of excessive consumption of foods rich in fats and sugars (5).

Similar to the group we studied, Rimarova *et al.* (9) found in their sample that most children think that they ate healthy. However, according to the authors' findings in the intake of fruit and vegetables, up to 18% of children answered that they did not consume fruit and vegetables. More than 50% of the respondents consumed fruit and vegetables only twice a week, which is insufficient, both in terms of fiber and pectin intake and in terms of vitamin intake. In our research sample, we found that 31% of the children consume vegetables only once a week or never. In the consumption of fruit, our findings were positive, children consume fruit daily or 2-3 times a week.

Analysis of the data generated in the ENERGY research project has shown that factors leading to undesirable behavior can be a result of a number of important factors at the level of the individual, home and school environment. The influence of parents (in the form of a role model, supporter, in setting rules and boundaries with the help of parental stimuli) seems to be crucial (3).

The results of our research point to the fact that it is necessary to primarily strengthen social work with families in Roma communities. In the work of health promotion assistants, we see limitations in the edification and education of Roma mothers, especially in the field of healthy child nutrition. In multidisciplinary cooperation, we need to make use of and more effectively apply the educational competence of nurses in practice (4).

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