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Challenges and barriers to healthy eating behaviors in the workplace: A pragmatic approach to promoting healthy aging

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Abstract:

BACKGROUND: The role of health-related behaviors, particularly eating behavior, in the health of middle-aged individuals in the workplace is crucial. This qualitative study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and barriers to healthy eating behaviors in the industrial workplace from the perspectives of middle-aged workers and employers.

METHODS: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants, including 5 workers aged 35 to 59 years, 3 nutrition experts, 2 health, safety and environment (HSE) experts, and 5 employers from industrial workplaces in Tehran, Iran. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants who could provide meaningful insights into the research question. The data were analyzed using Graneheim and Lundman approach with MAXQDA software.

RESULTS: The study revealed three main themes that hindered healthy eating behaviors in the workplace: (i) the absence of organizational structures for well-being and health, including sub-themes such as the lack of health-oriented organizational policies, inaccessibility to healthy nutritional resources, and restrictive rules, (ii) the pressure of organizational social norms, including sub-themes such as the impact of friendship networks and colleagues, and the effect of workplace culture, and (iii) the lack of a supportive learning environment for healthy behavior, including sub-themes such as the impact of poor interactions and the absence of supportive training.

CONCLUSION: The findings highlight the need for workplace health programs that address the identified challenges and promote healthy eating behaviors among middle-aged workers. Implementing health-focused policies and fostering a workplace environment that encourages nutritious food choices can enhance the overall health and well-being of workers and potentially lead to healthy aging in the future.

Keywords:

Healthy eating behavior, workplace, middle-aged workers, barriers, Challenges

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Introduction

With the advent of industrial changes and urbanization, non-communicable diseases (NCDs) have emerged as one of the most significant global public health concerns^[1-3]. Unhealthy lifestyles including unhealthy eating behaviors, smoking, alcohol consumption, drug abuse and stress have been identified as major contributing

factors to the prevalence of NCDs at work, leading to a lower increase rate of absenteeism^[4,5]. Unhealthy eating behaviors have a substantial impact on workers well-being and productivity^[6]. The negative effects of unhealthy eating habits at work can have long-term effects on people, particularly in old age^[7-9]. Understanding the factors that influence healthy eating behaviors among middle-aged workers and their employers is vital for promoting

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healthy dietary habits in the workplace. This qualitative study aimed to explore the perceptions and views of middle-aged workers and employers on challenges and barriers to healthy eating behaviors in the industrial workplace.

Methods

This study was a qualitative research and it employed content analysis to analyze data collected from semi-structured interviews with 15 participants, including 5 workers with different social status, 3 nutrition experts, 2 health, safety and environment (HSE) experts, and 5 employers from small and big industrial workplaces in different regions of Tehran^[10]. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants who could provide meaningful insights about the research question. The interviews began by asking the workers to explain their daily diets at home and workplace and also their individual perceptions and experiences with eating habits at the workplace, the way they choose their daily foods, and the definitions of healthy food, problems of choosing healthy food at the workplace and influencing factors on their eating habits and behaviors. To ensure the credibility and conformability of data, prolonged comprehensive engagement with participants, member checking and triangulation were conducted.

Results

The three main themes that emerged as barriers to healthy eating behaviors in the workplace were (i) the lack of organizational structures for well-being and health: This theme included the absence of health-oriented organizational policies, inaccessibility to healthy nutritional resources, and restrictive rules. (ii) Pressure of organizational social norms: This theme encompassed the impact of friendship networks and colleagues, as well as the effect of workplace culture. (iii) Supportive learning environment for healthy behavior: This theme included the impact of poor interactions and the absence of supportive training [Figure 1].

Theme 1: Lack of organizational structures for well-being and health

The absence of health-oriented organizational policies

A significant number of participants believed that the lack of policies and approaches of the organization for the well-being and health of workers, especially in the field of providing an environment for supporting healthy food behaviors, is an influencing factor in the formation of health-oriented behaviors of workers.

Inaccessibility to healthy food resources

Some participants believed that the availability of healthy food is a determinant factor for having healthy eating

behaviors at work and that this can be affected by the cost of food.

Restrictive rules

Furthermore, some participants believed that the current rules in the organization are outdated and can be an obstacle to the whole process of preparing healthy food. The participants noted that the rules should be adjusted with international standards and producers.

Theme 2: Pressure of organizational social norms

Impact of friendship networks and colleagues

Another main barrier to promoting healthy habits among workers is food preferences that are often influenced by the colleagues they hang out with at work. Spending a lot of time at work together leads to choosing similar behaviors and foods, which sometimes hinders a different plan from the group.

Effects of workplace culture

Furthermore, some participants held the view that individuals' attitudes toward healthy food play a crucial role in shaping the dietary habits of employees. In addition, some participants had this opinion that people's beliefs about healthy food are an influential factor in the formation of the employees' dietary behaviors.

Theme 3: Lack of learning environment for having healthy behavior

Impact of poor interactions

Furthermore, participants stated that a lack of communication between higher and lower levels of the organization in identifying and understanding employees' health requirements was a significant barrier to fostering health-oriented activities in the workplace.

Absence of supportive training

It was noted that the current educational content provided to workers was not tailored to their specific training needs and did not adequately address their specific challenges and concerns. This can impede their ability to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to promote a healthy work environment.

Discussion

The participants in this study reported that the absence of health-oriented organizational policies, inaccessibility to healthy nutritional resources, and restrictive rules were significant barriers to promoting healthy eating behaviors in the workplace. This finding is supported by recent research that has demonstrated the importance of organizational policies and practices in promoting employee health behaviors, especially eating behaviors^[11,12]. Incorporating organizational policies and practices has been shown to be more effective in promoting healthy behaviors^[13]. Previous studies have

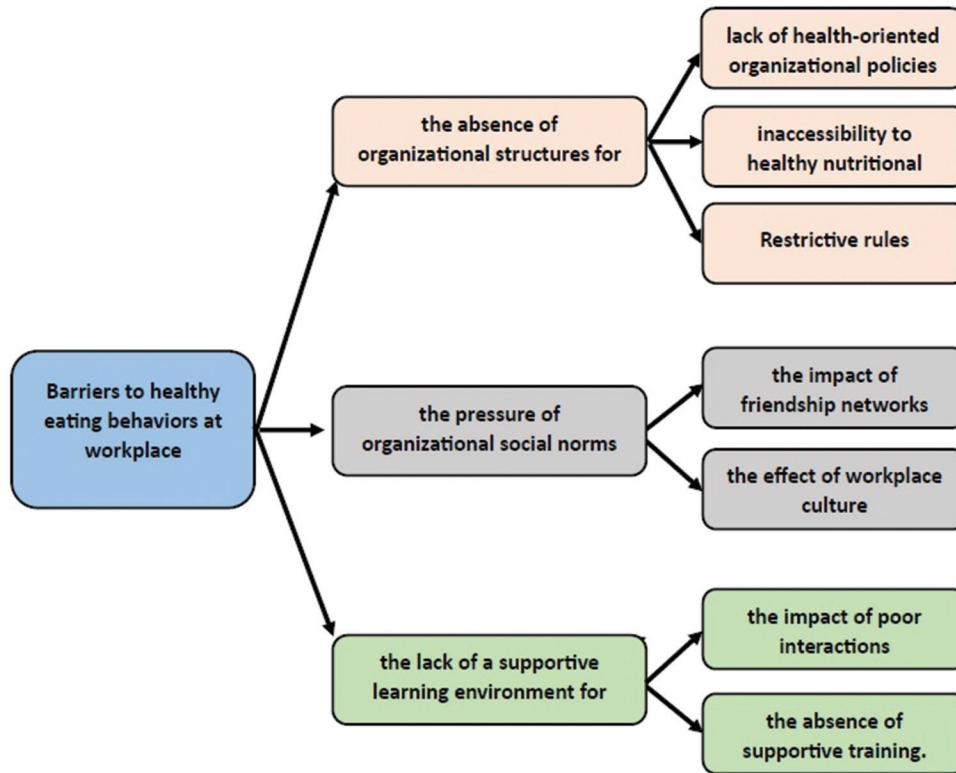


Figure 1: Main themes and their corresponding subthemes

also shown that the availability of unhealthy food options can have adverse effects on what employees eat^[14]. Conversely, when healthy and reasonably priced food options are available at the workplace, it can positively influence the food decisions of employees^[15].

The legal constraints recognized by the participants, such as employers not being able to pay more for food or not giving workers enough time for breakfast, were also mentioned in other studies. Similarly, a study identified that job design based on current rules could lead to a lack of defined time for breakfast or dinner for workers^[14]. Studies also suggest that if rules are defined based on the real health needs of the workers, they can have a positive impact on workers' health^[16,17]. Therefore, it is important for organizations to develop policies and practices that promote healthy behaviors in the workplace, while also prioritizing employee autonomy and well-being. The second theme identified in this study was the pressure of organizational social norms. Participants reported that food preferences were often influenced by a network of friends, colleagues, and the atmosphere of the workplace, which may affect the behaviors or eating habits of others. Studies have shown that people's preferences, interests, and eating habits can be influenced by the behavior of people who are in contact with each other for long hours unconsciously^[14,18,19].

The social and cultural contexts of the workplace can influence the food choices of adults, and many of these

concepts are contextualized from childhood^[20]. Research has shown that establishing a culture of health in the workplace may help facilitate the effectiveness of health promotion initiatives^[21].

The third theme identified in this study was the lack of a supportive learning environment. Participants reported that limited communication between higher and lower levels of the organization and inadequate training were significant barriers to promoting healthy eating behaviors. This finding is consistent with recent research which suggests that workers can make an active interaction with their supervisors to facilitate behavioral change^[22]. Moreover, studies suggest that creating valuable opportunities to educate people about changing behavior alongside providing healthy food options can have an effective role in promoting healthier eating behavior, and it may be feasible to achieve long-term improvements in workers dietary patterns^[11,15].

Conclusion

The study findings underscore the pressing need for robust workplace health programs that effectively address the identified challenges and actively promote healthy eating behaviors among middle-aged workers. By prioritizing health-focused policies and fostering a workplace environment that actively encourages nutritious food choices, organizations can augment

the overall health and well-being of their workforces, which may in turn contribute to healthy aging in the future. These findings signify a crucial opportunity for organizations to play a significant role in promoting healthier lifestyles and improving health outcomes among middle-aged workers, thereby potentially reducing the burden of chronic diseases and enhancing the quality of life for individuals and communities alike.

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Ethical considerations

The study protocol was approved by the University of Shahid Beheshti Committee (Ethical code: SBMU.RAM.REC.1394.345). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study, and all identifiable information was removed from the transcripts to protect participants privacy.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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