

South Carolina Study Finds Healthy Eating Identity is Associated with Healthier Food Choice Behaviors Among U.S. Army Soldiers

Researchers from the Arnold School of Public Health's Departments of Health Promotion, Education, and Behavior, Exercise Science, and Health Services Policy and Management at the University of South Carolina have partnered with the University of Kansas and Fort Sam Houston's Army Medical Department Center and School to complete a study connecting health eating identity with healthier food choice behaviors among U.S. Army soldiers. The study was published in [Military Medicine](#).

Due to the link between nutrition and performance, promoting healthy eating among soldiers is a priority for the U.S. Army. Efforts to encourage soldiers to make healthier food choices typically focus on nutrition education with low emphasis on other psychosocial determinants of food choice behaviors.

The researchers collected data via surveys from nearly 600 drill sergeant candidates. The surveys assessed nutrition knowledge, eating identity type, and food choice behaviors (e.g., fruit and vegetable intake, skipping meals, eating out frequency).

They analyzed the data using multiple linear regression models while controlling for race/ethnicity, education, and marital status to examine relationships between nutrition knowledge, a healthy eating identity, and soldiers' food choice behaviors. The study was approved by the Department of Defense and University of South Carolina's Institutional Review Boards.

The authors found that a healthy eating identity was positively associated with greater fruit and vegetable consumption and negatively associated with skipping meals and eating out frequency. Nutrition knowledge was negatively associated with skipping meals.

These findings suggest that fostering a healthy eating identity may be more effective for promoting healthy food choice behaviors than nutrition education alone. Determining if various points in a soldier's career could be leveraged to influence a healthy eating identity and behaviors could be an important strategy to improve compliance with health promotion programs.