

Emotions of Solitude and Exasperation Regarding Managing Dietary Limitations Among University Students

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ABSTRACT: Objective: Understanding the challenges faced by college students with dietary restrictions related to medical conditions is essential. Research is necessary to explore how these restrictions affect students' lives.

Participants: This study involved undergraduate and graduate students aged 18-26 who had a food allergy, food sensitivity, or autoimmune disease.

Methods: After completing a quantitative survey, participants could choose to participate in a follow-up interview. Video calls were conducted with 18 participants using a structured interview guide to discuss emotions related to managing medically restricted eating on campus and how that has affected life as a college student.

Results: Students expressed feelings of frustration, annoyance, discomfort, isolation, and increased anxiety when interacting with dining staff. They described challenges such as being excluded from on-campus events with free food, having to bring their meals to campus, and limited dining options when eating out.

Conclusions: Improvements are needed to better support students with medical dietary restrictions, both physically and

emotionally, by ensuring their inclusion in a more accommodating and supportive environment.

Keywords: *autoimmune disease, food allergies, food intolerances, food sensitivity*

Introduction

People with autoimmune diseases (AD), food allergies (FA), food intolerances, and sensitivities (FS) may need to follow medical dietary restrictions. These restrictions create various challenges when it comes to finding suitable food options. Financial constraints, accessibility issues, and food safety concerns become more evident for individuals living with these dietary restrictions. College students face limited food choices on campus, which can make their educational journey more demanding and stressful. According to the Centers for Disease Control, approximately 6% of adults and children in the US have a food allergy (De Petrillo, Hughes, McGuinness, Roberts, & Godfrey, 2021). Other studies suggest that FA affects 10% of adults and 8% of children, while 19% of adults believe they have a FA without a formal diagnosis (Gupta, Springston, Warriar, Smith, Kumar, Pongracic, & Holl, 2011 & Gupta, Warren, Smith, Blumenstock, Jiang, Davis, & Nadeau, 2018). Furthermore, FS impacts 15-20% of the population, while AD currently affects around 3-5% of the global population, with a rising trend, especially in Western societies (Mazzucca, Raineri, Cappellano, & Chiocchetti, 2021).

Some symptoms experienced by individuals when they consume foods they should avoid due to medical dietary restrictions include gastrointestinal issues such as diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, gas, bloating, and abdominal pain. They may also experience fatigue, anaphylaxis, hives, edema of the oral cavity, asthma, angioedema or swelling, lethargy, exercise-induced anaphylaxis, atopic eczema, or dermatitis (Muraro, Werfel, Hoffmann-Sommergruber, Roberts, Beyer, Bindslev-Jensen, & EAACI Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Guidelines Group, 2014). The nervous system can also be affected, potentially leading to irritability, anxiety, confusion, and loss of consciousness, with variations among individuals (Valenta, Hochwallner, Linhart, & Pahr, 2015).

Additionally, there are psychological effects, primarily increased anxiety and depression within this population (Polloni & Muraro, 2020), along with emotional, financial, and social challenges (Patel, Herbert, & Green, 2017). If left unmanaged, these effects can significantly impact overall health and may result in long-term side effects.

FA can cause severe, life-threatening reactions and necessitate carrying emergency epinephrine. Managing FS can make it difficult to follow an elimination diet to control symptoms (Valenta et al., 2015). College students often struggle to balance their time to prioritize health, finances, and academics. Students with dietary restrictions frequently find fewer options that appear safer due to the presence of allergy and ingredient labels (Bartuzi, Szamocka, & Ukleja-Sokołowska, 2023). Unfortunately, clear labeling isn't always available in dining halls and restaurants, making it more challenging and less convenient for students to find healthy meals and snacks at school (Singh & Whelan, 2011).

Many college events, such as sports games and clubs, often try to attract students by offering free food. This can be very isolating for students with medical dietary restrictions, who often face challenges in safely consuming the free food. They may need to plan and bring processed foods, such as protein bars or snacks. Sometimes, students even choose their college or graduate school based on how well the schools accommodate their dietary needs. If students want well-rounded meals, they might rule out certain schools if they are unsure their nutritional needs can be met, or may end up dropping out. According to the United States Nations Survey on Drug Use and Health, individuals over 18 who dropped out of school are more likely to report having a major chronic health condition. This was especially true for White and African American individuals compared to Hispanics (Vaughn, Salas-Wright, & Maynard, 2014).

Additionally, the limited free time for food preparation is further reduced by the demands of school, jobs, hobbies, and doctors' appointments. Students already experience significant stress from their academic duties, and the extra burden of dietary restrictions only adds to their mental load. This can be isolating for many people.

Research shows that individuals who advocate for themselves and connect with others facing similar challenges tend to perform better (Shaker & Matteson, 2013).

Furthermore, if accessible, having a multidisciplinary team can be helpful in their journey (Patel et al., 2017).

These students who are pursuing their graduate and undergraduate studies are a group that has not been fully studied yet, and there is still much to learn about how they manage their daily routines, especially concerning their nutritional needs (Shaker & Matteson, 2013). While many researchers agree that improvements are needed to help students better handle medical dietary restrictions and reduce stress, the specific priorities for these improvements remain a topic of debate (Ersig & Williams, 2018).

Since many long-term dietary habits are formed during college and carried into adulthood, the limited research on college-age individuals emphasizes the importance of further study on this group. This study aimed to document the experiences of a group of university students who identify as having food allergies, sensitivities, or intolerances, and to explore how these conditions impact their social, psychological, financial, and academic lives.

Materials and Methods

In this study, the researchers used Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of a group of college students. IPA helps us understand how individuals interpret and assign meaning to their experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022). These experiences are significant for the participants, similar to dealing with life-threatening and complex food allergies (FA) and intolerances. Before this study, the researchers collected data from this group of university students as part of an extensive quantitative research project approved by the LSU AgCenter Institutional Review Board. The results showed that students with FA, sensitivities, or intolerances did not consistently demonstrate the expected level of diligence when reading food labels.

Additionally, individuals with sensitivities often place less importance on following their dietary restrictions, despite experiencing uncomfortable and embarrassing side effects (Bosch, Niroula, & McKinley, 2024). To date, few qualitative interviews have been conducted with college students regarding FA. Recognizing the need and having information on some of the main challenges faced, a semi-structured interview guide was developed for this study, incorporating these common themes. A detailed interview guide was created to complement the questionnaire, which included the study details, informed consent, and space for participants to ask questions. The main prompts for this analysis include, “What are some emotions that come to mind when you think of living with dietary restrictions at LSU?” and “Tell me how your dietary restrictions have affected campus or college life so far.”

Table 1: Interview Guide: Questions and Prompts

Question/Topic	Interview Questions and Prompts
Emotional Impact	What are some emotions that come to mind when you think of living with dietary restrictions at LSU?
Social Experience	Do you feel like your dietary restrictions make you feel isolated, or like no one else really understands what it is like? In what ways do you feel people don't understand you?
Mental Health	How has having dietary restrictions affected your mental health?
Self-Advocacy	Talk about your experience(s) while speaking up for yourself about having dietary restrictions. How comfortable is this for you? Have you advocated for yourself to others (close friends, professors, family, etc.) about your dietary restrictions?
College Life Impact	Tell me some ways that your dietary restrictions have affected campus/college life so far.
Transition Challenges	What has been the hardest part about transitioning to life on LSU's campus with dietary restrictions?
Management Strategies	How do you currently manage your dietary restrictions? Is this overwhelming for you?
Recommendations	How do you think LSU could improve in accommodating people with dietary restrictions?
Additional Comments	Is there anything else that you would like to share?

Participant Recruitment

After completing the survey, participants could indicate their interest in further participation by providing their email addresses. This enabled them to join the second phase of the study, which involved a 20-minute interview. A study investigator later contacted those who opted in and provided a valid email address. The purpose of this contact was to schedule an interview via Microsoft Teams video conferencing. Of the 26 participants who opted in, 18 successfully planned and completed the interview.

Data Review and Coding

The Microsoft Teams system automatically transcribed each interview, which was then cross-checked for accuracy by a researcher who listened to the audio and compared it to the transcription document. A group of four researchers independently reviewed nine out of the eighteen interview transcriptions, ensuring each transcription was checked twice. To facilitate the review process, a codebook was created based on the eight main questions and five sub-questions, serving as themes and subthemes for analyzing the text. The duplicate reviews of the interviews were compared to verify that all content related to the themes and subthemes was captured. Finally, the authors analyzed the resulting qualitative data and identified two themes that best described students' experiences with food restrictions caused by food allergies, intolerances, and sensitivities on campus.

Results

Emotional Responses to Living with Dietary Restrictions

The interviews revealed a range of strong emotions, mainly centered on frustration and annoyance caused by the dietary restrictions they faced on a college campus. Along with these feelings, there was also anxiety about meal choices, dissatisfaction with their circumstances, and embarrassment when advocating for themselves or selecting different food options. The students often felt frustrated when they couldn't eat their preferred meals on campus. They usually watched their peers eat while they refrained due to health concerns. Some also felt uncomfortable asking about their food allergies or intolerances while dining on campus. Stress levels seemed to rise when dining staff failed to provide clear answers or were unaware of allergens like

shellfish or milk in the food. One student with lactose intolerance shared their disappointment with the lack of inclusivity, noting the absence of suitable options that meet their dietary needs, which made it hard to enjoy simple pleasures like ice cream from a popular dairy store. This negative sentiment highlights the need for better accommodations for students with dietary restrictions on campus.

Subsequent Effects on Campus/College Life Due to Dietary Restrictions

Many pointed out the inconvenience of spending whole days on campus and struggling to find available food. Some noted that this issue caused them to skip meals during the day because of classes and other commitments. Commuting students shared their difficulties of having to return to their cars, wait until they got home, or carry a large bag filled with food to sustain themselves throughout long days of school and work on campus. They also expressed concerns about feeling excluded from social events, and some worried about falling ill after eating on campus, which sometimes led to missed classes and doctor visits. One student recalled a time when they couldn't reach the hospital and had to call 911, missing a test as a result. Another shared an incident involving vegan cheese that contained lactose, which led to a hospital visit due to mislabelled information. Students with tree nut and/or sesame allergies, who had been affected since childhood, seemed to be less impacted because they had access to a variety of options.

Theme	No. of Comments that Referenced Code (n = 18)	Selected Respondent Quotes
Feelings of fear	2	<p><i>“It's scary. It's very scary actually. And it makes me very anxious to eat anything.”</i></p> <p><i>“I'm scared a lot like cause in the dining halls. There is a lot of, like shellfish, because that's what allergy I have and sometimes you don't know or like whenever you're in the Union, you don't really know Like what food is going to be cooked with shellfish and what's not? And I feel weird whenever I have to ask.”</i></p>

Feelings of aggravation	5	<p><i>“Some aggravation. And, umm, I guess solitude might be another word that you could use, or I would use.”</i></p> <p><i>“It kind of made me feel like they didn't believe me because they made my doctor and made my doctor send over a note. she was so aggravated at the fact that they were like you have to send over professional documentation with your doctor's signature and stuff.”</i></p>
Feelings of embarrassment	1	<p><i>“I would honestly say embarrassing because for my case, I have low blood pressure. But my doctor recommended that I increase my salt intake. So a lot of the times when I'm feeling like I'm going to pass out, or something like that I'll have to take salt packets and just like eat them as they are. I haven't had to do it in a public place yet, but it's a little embarrassing.”</i></p>
Feeling excluded	3	<p><i>“I want to stay with friends and study. But I literally can't because there's no food here I eat, like to eat.”</i></p>
Falling ill and missing class	2	<p><i>“One time he put out. Vegan cheese that still had lactose in it. So it wasn't, it was like plant-based, but it wasn't vegan ohm. And so I had to go to the hospital for 7 1/2 hours because I wasn't told. Well, that one time when I was in the hospital, I missed class. It was like the week before final exams and so umm I had a lab final the day after. Like when I came back to school, and I didn't do very good at it because I was exhausted, and I couldn't study and after that, I just really wished I would have stayed with my parents. It just sucked and then there was another time where umm, I couldn't get to the hospital and so I had to call 911 and that was just really embarrassing. And I missed a test that day too.”</i></p>
Struggles of bringing their own food	2	<p><i>“But like, for example, today I literally had to pack my breakfast, lunch, and dinner and like snacks, because, like I'm on campus all day today. And when I tell you I have literally a duffle bag, 2 lunch kits, because there's no food out here, and I</i></p>

		<i>don't care what people say but it does affect me because I have to run to my car to get it. I've always done it, not a big deal, but when it comes to like you're on campus and you're starving because you didn't pack the lunch that day, or you didn't bring enough in the lunch. I'm just like I don't even know what to eat at this point and sometimes I have to go home."</i>
Meal skipping	1	<i>"Having to think way ahead of time about like what I'm going to eat that day or the next day, like if, having made sure I have some at home to bring for lunch. If I don't, I may be like, can't eat till I get back home from classes. Like there's no one else to fall back on. If I don't have a meal like there's no one else to rely on, no one else to blame. It's all on me to figure it out."</i>
Struggles to locate appropriate food	2	<i>"I'm scared a lot like cause in the dining halls. There is a lot of, like shellfish, because that's what allergy I have and sometimes you don't know or like whenever you're in the Union, you don't really know Like what food is going to be cooked with shellfish and what's not? And I feel weird whenever I have to ask."</i>

Discussion

Typically, this group of college students faces unfair obstacles when trying to meet their dietary needs on campus. They carry additional responsibilities and worries that come with any food-related situation. Colleges across the US use different strategies to support this group. Some schools offer entirely gluten-free dining halls, while others have meal stations that accommodate the top 8 allergens and provide allergy-free snacks at their markets. These meals often lack variety, which can lead many students to get bored eating the same foods repeatedly, especially when it seems to be the only sign that staff are paying attention. Colleges can help these students by offering access to Registered Dietitians for dietary advice, psychologists for emotional support, and doctors familiar with their specific conditions and the challenges they face at campus health clinics. Another option is allergy-friendly dorms, which prevent students with allergies from being exposed to airborne allergens in their living spaces.

It is essential to increase awareness among staff members in the food industry who work on and around college campuses. Without proper understanding and training, the only unfortunate option would be to exclude this group from required meal plans.

However, this would lead to a larger drop in campus revenue than the cost of providing support for individuals with dietary restrictions. A suggested solution to address food allergies in college settings is to have staff simulate having an allergy to a meal or a day, and try to order from the restaurant. This exercise would help them empathize with students and customers with allergies. Additional training in food safety, conducted by Registered Dietitians and allergy specialists, could further improve the conditions in dining halls and grab-and-go outlets.

Conclusion

This study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the primary challenges and unique struggles experienced by college students with medical dietary restrictions.

Participants reported a wide range of emotional responses to navigating college life with dietary restrictions, including frustration, anxiety, isolation, and discomfort, primarily when dining staff could not confidently address their concerns. Students described feeling excluded from campus events that offered free food, burdened by the need to carry all their meals for the day, and limited in their options for dining out. Many expressed concerns about becoming ill after eating on campus, which led to class absences, doctor visits, and difficulty keeping up with academic responsibilities.

Findings highlight the need for universities to better support students with medical dietary restrictions by improving food services, training staff, and implementing inclusive campus practices. Addressing both physical and emotional needs can enhance students' sense of safety, belonging, and academic success, ultimately contributing to a more equitable college experience.

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