## Sports Nutrition Knowledge and Dietary Habits of Students at Faculty of Sports Sciences

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#### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to assess the level of sports nutrition knowledge and dietary habits of 117 students at the Faculty of Sports Sciences. The Nutrition for Sport Knowledge Questionnaire (NSKQ) was used to measure the sports nutrition knowledge of students, whereas dietary habits were assessed using a 24-h dietary recall. The results revealed that 74.4% of students demonstrated poor sports nutrition knowledge. The NSKQ scores were not significantly correlated with energy and macronutrient and micronutrient intake, except for a negative correlation with vitamin A intake (r = -0.190, P = 0.040). Further, the students' NSKQ scores did not significantly affect the use of ergogenic aids (P > 0.05). This study showed that sports sciences students had poor nutrition knowledge, which did not significantly affect dietary intake and use of ergogenic aids. Further studies are needed to explore the correlation between nutrition knowledge, dietary practices, and dietary intake of students at the Faculty of Sports Sciences.

Keywords: Dietary habits, nutrition knowledge, sports, student

#### INTRODUCTION

Sports nutrition is a multidisciplinary field involving healthy eating practices to optimize athletic performance, supported by disciplines such as exercise biochemistry and physiology. Sports nutrition affects important factors such as the health, body weight, body composition, recovery time, and exercise performance of athletes (1,2). The aim of sports nutrition is to develop appropriate nutrition strategies to increase exercise capacity, reduce the risk of injury, speed up the recovery process, and achieve optimal performance for athletes. Tailoring a nutrition plan to the specific needs of athletes is crucial to enhance exercise capacity and maximize performance. This involves optimizing body composition, ensuring adequate energy, protein, and carbohydrate intake, maintaining proper hydration, balancing vitamins and minerals, and using ergogenic aids (3, 4, 5).

The energy and nutrient requirements of individuals who exercise are different from those of sedentary individuals. Macronutrients such as carbohydrates, proteins, and fats are essential for meeting the increased energy needs during exercise. Carbohydrates, in particular, delay fatigue and increase endurance during exercise. Adequate protein intake facilitates the repair of damaged muscle tissue and the formation of new muscle fibers. The intake of carbohydrates, proteins, and fluids after exercise can reduce recovery time and muscle soreness. Micronutrients with antioxidant properties, such as vitamins C and E, can reduce exercise-induced inflammation and muscle damage, whereas calcium and vitamin D can enhance bone health and lower the risk of fractures (5,6).

Students in the field of sports sciences often face time and space constraints while preparing healthy meals due to their involvement in academic programs and training. They also encounter financial constraints, making it difficult to buy healthy foods, coupled with a lack of skills in planning and preparing meals. Hence, students tend to skip meals or resort to unhealthy snacks (7,8). Understanding the nutrition knowledge and dietary habits of student athletes is essential for improving their athletic performance (9). Inadequate nutrition knowledge among students can negatively affect both healthy eating habits and sports performance (10). However, university students engaged in sports professionally lack adequate knowledge of sports nutrition (11,12). A study involving student athletes showed that a majority of students (88.6%) had poor sports nutrition knowledge (13). Adequate nutrition knowledge among students at the Faculty of Sports Sciences can enhance their own dietary habits potentially leading to improved athletic performance.

This study firstly hypothesized that students at the Faculty of Sports Sciences have a high level of sports nutrition knowledge. Second hypothesis is that nutrition knowledge positively influences their dietary intake. And third hypothesis is that nutrition knowledge positively influences use of ergogenic aids. The aim of this study was to evaluate the level of sports nutrition knowledge, dietary intake, and dietary habits of students at the Faculty of Sports Sciences.

## **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

#### **Research model**

This cross-sectional study involved 117 students aged 19–30 years from the Faculty of Sports Sciences at Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University who voluntarily participated between January and June 2023. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Health Sciences Ethics Committee of Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University under decision number 19-1247 on 08/12/2022. The sample size for the study was determined using G\*Power 3.1 to be 117 participants, with a 5% margin of error and 80% power.

## **Data collection tools**

The research data were obtained by researchers using a face-to-face questionnaire. The questionnaire form included the following components:

Sociodemographic characteristics: Details on age, sex, department of study, and class level were obtained.

Dietary habits: The number of daily main and snack meals of students and their use of ergogenic aids were recorded.

Anthropometric measurements: Students selfreported their own body weight (kg) and height (cm), which were then used to calculate body mass index (BMI) using the following formula: weight (kg)/height (m<sup>2</sup>). The resulting BMI values were classified based on the criteria set by the World Health Organization (14).

The Nutrition for Sport Knowledge Questionnaire: The original name of the scale is "The Nutrition for Sport Knowledge Questionnaire (NSKQ)." It was developed by Trakman and colleagues (15) in 2017 to determine the sports knowledge of nutrition among adult athletes. Çırak and Çakıroğlu performed the Turkish validity and reliability assessment of the scale (16). For overall performance in NSKQ, the knowledge scores were calculated from correct answers and evaluated using the scoring system (68 items considered as 100). According

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to this system, "Poor" knowledge level (0%–49%), "Average" knowledge level (50%–65%), "Good" knowledge level (66%–75%), and "Excellent" knowledge level (76%–100%) were accepted.

24-h dietary recall: Retrospective 24-h dietary recalls were used to evaluate the eating habits of students. Daily energy, macronutrient, and micronutrient intakes were determined using the Nutrition Information System (Beslenme Bilgi Sistemi-BeBis) program (17).

## **Data Analysis**

Statistical analyses of data were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics v26 in a computer-based environment. Frequency tables and descriptive statistics (mean  $\pm$  standard deviation,  $X \pm$  SD) were used for analysis. The Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was used to assess normal distribution.

The independent-sample t test was employed to compare measurement values between two independent groups with normal quantitative data. One-way analysis of variance was used for comparisons involving more than two independent groups. For data lacking normality, the Mann–Whitney U test was applied to compare two independent groups, whereas the Kruskal-Wallis test was used for comparing more than two independent groups. The Pearson correlation coefficient was used to examine the correlation between two guantitative variables with normal distribution; and the Spearman correlation coefficient was used because at least one quantitative variable did not have a normal distribution. A logistic regression model was run to measure the multivariate correlations between variables. A notable threshold of *P* < 0.05 was set for all statistical analyses.

## RESULTS

A total of 117 students [52 female (44.4%) and 65 male (55.6%)] participated in the study. The results showed that 64.1% of the students ate three main meals a day, whereas 41.9% stated that they had two snacks a day. Also, 21.4% of the students used ergogenic aids, with products such as protein powder (14.7%), glutamine (5.1%), creatine derivatives (10.3%), branched-chain amino acids (6.0%), and omega-3 (6.0%) among them. Moreover, 75.2% of the students were of normal weight, whereas 18.8% were overweight. A significant difference was observed in NSKQ scores according to the department of study of the students (P = 0.005). The NSKQ score of the coaching education department was significantly

different from that of the sports management department (P = 0.004), and the NSKQ score of the exercise and sport sciences department was significantly different from that of the sports management department (P= 0.003). No significant differences were found in NSKQ scores based on sex, class, number of main meals and snacks, and the use of ergogenic aids (P > 0.05) (Table 1).

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As shown in Table 2, a weak negative correlation was found between NSKQ score and daily vitamin A intake (r = -0.190, P = 0.040), whereas no statistically significant correlation was found with energy, other nutrients, and BMI (P > 0.05).

Table 1 Comparison of The Nutrition for Sport Knowledge Questionnaire scores based on the demographic characteristics and dietary habits of students

		NSKQ	
	N (%)	Mean ± SD	<u>P</u>
Sex			0.522
Female	52 (44.4)	$26.79 \pm 8.54$	
Male	65 (55.6)	27.81 ± 8.66	
Department			0.005
Coaching education	58 (49.6)	28.57 ± 8.68°	
Exercise and sport sciences	33 (28.2)	29.00 ± 7.66 <sup>b</sup>	
Sports management	26 (22.2)	$22.58 \pm 8.92^{a,b}$	
Class		22.00 ± 0.02	0.483
1	33 (28.2)	$25.88 \pm 8.24$	01100
2	43 (36.8)	26.98 ± 9.27	
3	22 (18.8)	$29.05 \pm 6.63$	
4	19 (16.2)	29.89 ± 0.85	
Number of main meals	12 (10:2)	20101 2 9107	0.358
Less than 3	42 (35.9)	26.38 ± 7.90	0.000
3	75 (64.1)	$27.91 \pm 8.84$	
Number of snacks			0.120
None	13 (11.1)	27.77 ± 8.40	
1	40 (34.2)	$26.20 \pm 9.02$	
2	48 (41.9)	$28.06 \pm 8.09$	
3	16 (13.7)	27.81 ± 9.52	
Use of ergogenic aids			0.773
Using	25 (21.4)	$27.80 \pm 9.47$	
Not using	92 (78.6)	$27.24 \pm 8.37$	
Ergogenic aids used <sup>*</sup>			
Protein powder	17 (14.7)		
Glutamine	6 (5.1)		
Creatine derivatives	12(10.3)		
BCAAs	7 (6.0)		
Omega-3	7 (6.0)		
BMI (kg/m²) (mean ± SD; 22.78 ± 2.80)			0.118
Underweight	5 (4.3)	$28.20 \pm 5.26$	
Normal weight	88 (75.2)	$26.86 \pm 8.85$	
Overweight	22 (18.8)	$30.14 \pm 7.30$	
Obese	2 (1.7)	16.50 ± 7.78	
NSKQ (mean ± SD; 27.36 ± 8.58)			
Poor	87 (74.4)		
Average	28 (23.9)		
Good	2 (1.7)		

\*\**P* < 0.01. \*Multiple responses were given. a,bValues denoted by the same letter in the same column are significantly different. BCAAs, Branched-chain amino acids; BMI: body mass index; NSKQ, The Nutrition for Sport Knowledge Questionnaire.

Table 2 Correlation between The Nutrition for Sport Knowledge Questionnaire scores and dietary energy, macronutrient and micronutrient intakes, and BMI of students

	Ν	ISKQ
	r	Р
Energy (kcal)	-0.093	0.316
Carbohydrate (g)	-0.139	0.135
Carbohydrate (%)	-0.053	0.567
Protein (g)	-0.111	0.233
Protein (%)	-0.090	0.332
Fat (g)	-0.004	0.963
fat (%)	0.106	0.255
otal fiber (g)	0.013	0.885
oluble fiber (g)	0.035	0.709
nsoluble fiber (g)	-0.143	0.125
/itamin A (μg/RE)	-0.190	0.040*
/itamin E (mg)	0.016	0.867
hiamine (mg)	-0.151	0.104
iboflavin (mg)	-0.136	0.144
liacin (mg)	-0.076	0.417
/itamin B6 (mg)	-0.065	0.484
olate (mcg)	-0.163	0.079
/itamin B12 (mcg)	0.045	0.628
/itamin C (mg)	0.017	0.857
odium (mg)	0.019	0.843
otassium (mg)	-0.156	0.094
alcium (mg)	-0.051	0.583
lagnesium (mg)	-0.155	0.096
hosphorus (mg)	-0.092	0.322
ron (mg)	-0.112	0.230
Zinc (mg)	-0.111	0.235
BMI (kg/m²)	0.099	0.289

\**P* < 0.05. BMI, Body mass index; NSKQ, The Nutrition for Sport Knowledge Questionnaire

The department of study, number of main meals, and NSKQ score exhibited no significant effect on the use of ergogenic aids (P > 0.05). Male students were 4.552 times more likely than female students to use ergogenic aids, those consuming three snacks were 9.461 times more likely than non-snackers, and second-year students were 0.072 times less likely than first-year students to use ergogenic aids (P < 0.05) (Table 3).

## DISCUSSION

The results showed that most (74.4%) of the students had poor sports nutrition knowledge; hence, Hypothesis 1 was rejected. NSKQ scores were not significantly correlated with energy, macronutrient, and micronutrient intake, except for a negative correlation with vitamin A intake (r = -0.190, P = 0.040); hence, Hypothesis 2 was rejected. The level of sports nutrition knowledge also did not affect the use of ergogenic aids, leading to the rejection of Hypothesis 3.

Sufficient nutrition knowledge is associated with diet quality and is one of the most important factors that can improve the training requirements, performance, and recovery of athletes (12). Studies have shown that the level of nutrition knowledge is inadequate in university

							95% Cl	
<b>Risk factor</b>	β	SE	Wald	df	Р	OR	Lower	Upper
Sex (female)	1.516	0.680	4.962	1	0.026*	4.552	1.200	17.272
Class (second)	-2.624	0.860	9.306	1	0.002**	0.072	0.013	0.391
Snacks (3)	2.247	1.109	4.109	1	0.043*	9.461	1.077	83.081

Table 3 Logistic regression analysis of factors affecting the use of ergogenic aids among students

P < 0.05, P < 0.01,  $\beta$ , Regression coefficient; CI, confidence interval; df, degrees of freedom; OR, odds ratio; *P*, significance level; SE, standard error; Wald, Wald value.

students who exercise (18, 19). Athletes generally have insufficient knowledge in areas such as energy, macronutrients and micronutrients, dietary supplements, dietary fat sources, and weight management (9). A study conducted with first- and fourth-year students at the Faculty of Sports Sciences showed that 65.6% of the students had poor nutrition knowledge, whereas 23.0% had excellent nutrition knowledge (20). Similarly, the majority of students studying in sports sciences faculties (95.8%) had poor sports nutrition knowledge (21). Factors such as age, sex, type and duration of sport, and field of study affect the level of nutrition knowledge among students who exercise (22). Female students had a higher level of sports nutrition knowledge than male students. However, the level of nutrition knowledge was similar among departments and class levels in the sports sciences faculty (23). Another study conducted with students studying sports management demonstrated the level of nutrition knowledge of female students to be higher than that of male students (13). Unlike these studies, Andrew et al. (10) showed that the levels of sports nutrition knowledge of university students were similar based on sex, type of sport, and class level. Uzlu et al. (24) examined the students at the School of Physical Education and Sports and found that the level of nutrition knowledge was similar based on sex and class level. This study revealed that 74.4% of the students had a poor level of sports nutrition knowledge, consistent with other studies. Sports nutrition knowledge was similar based on sex, class, number of main and snack meals, and use of dietary supplements. Also, the average knowledge level of students studying in the sports management department was lower than the knowledge level of those studying in the coaching education and exercise and sports sciences departments. Based on these findings, it was presumed that the level of overall sports nutrition knowledge of students in the sports sciences faculty was poor. More studies should be conducted to compare the

levels of sports nutrition knowledge of students based on their demographic characteristics and department of study.

The health and performance of athletes whose dietary requirements are not met are negatively impacted. Athletes with inadequate protein intake may experience muscle loss, whereas individuals with inadequate energy intake may experience weight loss. The athletes are unable to meet their dietary needs due to factors such as sex, socioeconomic status, type of sport, taste perception, use of dietary supplements, lack of nutrition education, and insufficient nutrition knowledge (25). Athletes with sufficient nutrition knowledge prefer consuming healthier foods and have better diet quality (26). Nutrition education interventions in athletes increase their levels of nutrition knowledge and diet guality, reduce body fat mass, increase muscle mass, and improve performance (27,28). In a previous study, a negative correlation (r = -0.06, P < 0.05) was observed between the level of sports nutrition knowledge and dietary sodium intake of adolescent soccer players, and a positive correlation (r = 0.028, P < 0.05) was detected between calcium intake and the level of nutrition knowledge (27). Jenner et al. (29) revealed a positive correlation between the level of nutrition knowledge and dietary calcium (r = 0.43, P = 0.004), fiber (r = 0.51, P = 0.001), and protein (r = 0.35, P = 0.02) intake in Australian football players. In another study, a positive correlation was observed between sports nutrition knowledge and dietary energy intake (r = 0.046, P = 0.014), carbohydrate intake (r = 0.043, P = 0.039), and lean soft tissue mass (r = 0.051, P = 0.039) in athletes (30). However, a weak correlation has been reported between the level of nutrition knowledge and nutrient intake through diet (25). Suherman et al. (31) found that the level of nutrition knowledge in handball players had a weak but notable effect on their dietary habits. Jagin et al. (32) examined the correlation between the level of nutrition knowledge and body composition and found a negative

correlation between sports nutrition knowledge score and body fat percentage and mass in athletes. However, a study involving young athletes reported no correlation between the level of nutrition knowledge and body fat (P > 0.05) (33). This study detected no obvious correlation between students' sports nutrition knowledge score and dietary energy, macronutrient and micronutrient intake, and BMI values, except for dietary vitamin A intake (r =-0.091, P = 0.040) (P > 0.05). This might be due to poor sports nutrition knowledge of the majority of students. However, psychological, environmental, and biological factors such as eating disorders, perceived body image, hedonic hunger, and socioeconomic level may also influence individuals' eating behavior and body composition (34). Therefore, the correlation between sports nutrition knowledge, diet, and body composition in individuals who exercise should be explored.

Dietary ergogenic aids are products used by athletes to increase endurance, enhance muscle mass and fat burning, accelerate recovery, and reduce injuries and fatigue. These products include vitamins, minerals, amino acids, metabolites, and so forth, which can be added to athletes' diets as supplements. Proteins, fats, caffeine, creatine, nitrate, taurine, beta-alanine, glutamine, antioxidants, essential amino acids, various vitamins, and mineral supplements are reported to affect athlete performance (35,36,37). A previous study stated that 90.6% of university students who exercised used dietary supplements, and the usage increased with higher class levels. However, age, sex, and type of sport did not affect the use of dietary supplements (38). Another study showed that 58.3% of students who exercised had used at least one type of dietary supplement in the last 6 months, with men and students aged more than 20 years using more products than women and those aged less than 20 years (39). In a different study, 15.3% of male students who exercised used dietary supplements, with the most preferred products being creatine, protein supplements, ginseng, multivitamins, calcium, and vitamin D (40). Vinnikov et al. (41) found that 29% of university students engaged in recreational sports used dietary supplements, with vitamins being the most commonly used products. In the same study, age and a low-fat diet influenced the use of dietary supplements, whereas income level did not. In another study, the intake of micronutrient supplements among university students was found to be similar based on sex and type of sport practiced (42). In this

study, 21.4% of students used ergogenic aids, with the most commonly used products being protein powders and creatine derivatives. The factors influencing the use of ergogenic aids were being a male student, being in the first year, and having three snacks a day. When this study and previous studies were evaluated, the frequency and type of ergogenic aids used varied among university students who exercised. Based on these findings, it is presumed that the use of dietary supplements is higher in men than in women. The higher usage among individuals consuming three snacks a day suggests that the use of dietary supplements may be more common in students with healthy eating habits or in those who pay attention to healthy eating. However, the level of sports nutrition knowledge did not affect the use of ergogenic aids. Hence, students use products regardless of their knowledge level, and increasing their level of nutrition knowledge is essential for making healthy choices in the use of ergogenic aids.

In conclusion, this study found that the level of nutrition knowledge of students at the Faculty of Sports Sciences was poor. No correlations were found between the levels of nutrition knowledge and dietary intakes of individuals, except for vitamin A. Also, NSKQ scores did not affect ergogenic aid use. It is important for students at the Faculty of Sports Sciences to participate in nutrition education, seminars, and similar programs during their studies to enhance their levels of nutrition knowledge. Thus, the correlation between the levels of nutrition knowledge and dietary habits of athletes needs further investigation.

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