Nutritional Behavior of Rural Mexicans: Not What You May Believe!

Background:
• Because of the growth of Latino immigration to North Carolina, family physicians are increasingly treating children and adults of Mexican heritage.
• This population experiences a disproportionately high incidence of diabetes and cardiovascular disease.
• Nutritional habits are known to correlate with obesity, a risk factor for these diseases.
• Studies have suggested acculturation to the typically unhealthy American diet may be partially responsible for increased obesity in this population.

Objective:
• To conduct structured dietary recall interviews in typical source communities for immigrants to North Carolina to determine what Mexicans eat.
• To identify whether a return to traditional eating patterns from their home country would be a successful intervention strategy for Mexican immigrants in the US who have unhealthy dietary habits.

Methods:
• A validated, reliable structured dietary recall instrument that had been used previously to screen Latinos in the US was adapted to create an 11-question survey appropriate for Mexico.
• Structured dietary recall interviews were conducted by 5 Medical student research assistants with Spanish fluency.
• 364 adults were surveyed in 11 rural communities in Guanajuato state, Mexico, source of nearly 1/8 of Mexican immigrants.
• Respondents were questioned about dietary intake of fruits, vegetables, dairy products, tortillas, lean protein, protein high in saturated fat, soft drinks and high-sugar drinks, fried food, simple sugars, butter or lard, and salt.

Results:
• The majority of participants do not eat any fruit or vegetables (54% and 69% respectively) on a daily basis.
• 63% reported eating more than 8 tortillas per day.
• 63% always added salt to their food.
• Only 56% indicated that they ate at least one serving of lean protein per week, while 75% ate at least one serving of protein high in saturated fat.
• Intake of soft drinks and other high-sugar drinks was high, with 76% drinking at least one 8oz. glass per day, and 32% drinking three or more 8oz. glasses per day.
• The prevalence of butter or lard, simple-sugars and fried-foods in diets was relatively low, however.

Discussion:
These results indicate that rural Mexicans do not practice healthy dietary habits. Problems include high intake of carbohydrates (especially tortillas) and saturated fats, low intake of fruits and vegetables, and high soda consumption. Prior studies by our project have found high prevalence rates of obesity, diabetes, and prediabetes in this population, all of which are diet-related conditions.

These data can be used to help plan dietary interventions in the future. Since U.S. Mexican immigrants tend to keep strong ties with their family back home, both research and practice may need to address both settings.

Conclusions:
Contrary to popular belief, Mexicans who immigrated to the US do not come from communities where dietary habits are healthy. Instead, there is potential for large improvement in eating patterns on both sides of the border. Here in the US, interventions focusing on learning the elements of a healthy diet and integrating them into a traditional Mexican diet may be more effective than encouraging a return to traditional dietary habits.