



Abstract

# Psychological Distress and Its Association with Discretionary Choices Intake in Australian Women of Reproductive Age during COVID-19 <sup>†</sup>

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic has been disruptive to people's mental health and lifestyle, including dietary intakes. This study aimed to explore psychological distress, lifestyle, and demographic factors and the relationship to discretionary choices in women of reproductive age (18–50 years) during COVID-19 in Australia. Reproductive-aged women (18–50 years) in Australia were invited to participate in a national online survey, between October and November 2020. Targeted recruitment ensured broad national representativeness across age and state of residence. Psychological distress score, socioeconomic characteristics, physical activity, and frequencies of discretionary choices (sugar-sweetened beverages, alcohol, and discretionary foods) were collected. Using the R statistical software (R Core Team, 2020), logistic regression was performed to analyse the data. A total of 1005 women were included in the study. Around 40% of the women reported a high level of psychological distress. About half of all the women had a higher intake of sugar-sweetened beverages (>1/week) (46%) and alcohol ( $\geq 2$ /week) (49%) and 15% reported a higher intake of discretionary foods ( $\geq 3$ /day). Women of Australian, New Zealander, or Pacific ethnicity and women with more sitting times were more likely to have higher consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages. Women of older age (45–50 y), women who reported a higher annual household income ( $\geq$  AUD100,000), and women who had moderate or high physical activity were more likely to consume high intakes of alcohol. Women with high psychological distress, and those who gained weight during the pandemic, had a greater likelihood of high intake of discretionary foods. Such a high intake of discretionary choices in stressful situations, including the COVID-19 pandemic, needs appropriate public health strategies to avoid further mental and metabolic health issues.

**Keywords:** discretionary food; psychological distress; COVID-19; sugar-sweetened beverage; alcohol

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