

Tracking food and beverage purchases in remote NT communities

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Measuring what people eat is important for informing food and nutrition policy and programs, according to research from Menzies School of Health Research (Menzies) published in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* today.

The paper, *A comparison of dietary estimates from the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey (NATSINPAS) to food and beverage purchase data*, shows there is a need to track community nutrition over time using food and beverage data to support decision makers in improving the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote communities.

Menzies research fellow and lead author, Dr Emma McMahon said while measuring what people eat is important for informing food and nutrition policy and programs, the difficulties of doing so accurately and cost-effectively are well known.

“Current studies do not give us the whole picture as people generally report eating less food because they don’t remember everything they have eaten or they underestimate the amount they have eaten, and people report eating more healthier foods and less unhealthy foods than they actually consume,” said Dr McMahon.

In the 2012-2013 NATSINPAS, energy intake was 25%-30% lower than expected, suggesting underreporting and reporting bias.

“We compared the results from the very remote sample of the NATSINPAS to data of all foods and drinks purchases over one year from 20 very remote Indigenous communities (10 per cent of the very remote Indigenous Australian population). Both datasets incorporated large samples of Indigenous Australians who live very remotely, providing a unique opportunity to compare the food and nutrition estimates.

“We found that reported intake of less healthy foods tended to be lower and healthy foods tended to be higher in the self-reported data than the sales data. For example sales of table sugar, soft drinks, sweet biscuits, processed meats and cordials were higher than reported while fruit, vegetables, fish, eggs and meat were lower.

“While there are limitations with using food and beverage sales data to estimate dietary intake such as limited data on food wastage or traditional foods, these findings are consistent with the types of foods and drinks we would expect to be under and overreported.

“We are currently investigating options to support decision makers track community nutrition over time using food and beverage data in improving the health of their communities,” said Dr McMahon.

The article is available at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1753-6405.12718/full>

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Menzies School of Health Research

Menzies School of Health Research is one of Australia's leading medical research institutes dedicated to improving Indigenous, global and tropical health. Menzies has a history of over 30 years of scientific discovery and public health achievement. Menzies works at the frontline, joining with partners across the Asia-Pacific as well as Indigenous communities across northern and central Australia. Menzies collaborates to create new knowledge, grow local skills and find enduring solutions to problems that matter.

The Menzies nutrition program is researching innovative approaches to support capacity of decision-makers and leaders at the community level in improving the population's diet.