

Instant Noodles, Frozen Foods, and Student Lifestyle: Perception and Usage Patterns

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Abstract

This study investigates the perception, consumption frequency, and lifestyle impacts of instant noodles and frozen foods among college students. A majority of respondents belonged to the 18–20 age group and undergraduate level, highlighting the significance of convenience foods in student life. The analysis reveals that consumption is primarily motivated by quick preparation (75%) and taste (62.5%), while health perceptions remain moderate, with 51.8% of students regarding such foods as “somewhat healthy.” Despite high awareness of nutritional drawbacks, most students (62.5%) reported no noticeable health effects. Variations across academic disciplines, living arrangements, and gender further shape food habits. The findings highlight the critical role of time constraints, affordability, and lifestyle in driving consumption.

Keywords: Instant noodles, Frozen foods, Student lifestyle, Convenience foods, Eating habits, Health perception

1. Introduction

The lifestyle of college students is often characterized by the constant juggling of academic responsibilities, extracurricular activities, and personal commitments, all of which place heavy demands on their time and resources. In this fast-paced context, food choices are frequently dictated not only by taste preferences but also by convenience, affordability, and availability. Among the many options available, instant noodles and frozen foods have emerged as staple quick-fix meals, especially among young adults transitioning into independent living. These products are inexpensive, widely accessible, and require minimal preparation, making them highly appealing to students who often lack both the time and cooking skills to prepare traditional meals.

Globally, the consumption of instant noodles has grown steadily, with Asian countries, including India, being among the largest consumers. Frozen foods, on the other hand, are rapidly gaining popularity as urbanization and changing lifestyles fuel demand for ready-to-eat meals. Within the student community, these products are not merely food items but also cultural symbols of convenience and shared experiences, particularly in hostel or shared accommodation settings. However, despite their popularity, such foods

raise important questions about nutritional adequacy and long-term health implications, especially when consumed as substitutes for balanced meals.

Students form a unique population segment for studying these trends. They are at a life stage where independence, identity formation, and lifestyle experimentation converge. Their eating habits are influenced by factors such as peer culture, academic stress, limited budgets, and restricted access to kitchen facilities. These choices not only affect their present health but may also shape long-term dietary behaviors. Furthermore, as future professionals, their habits and attitudes toward food consumption may carry broader social implications. This makes it important to analyze their perceptions, usage patterns, and awareness of instant and frozen foods within the larger context of health, convenience, and lifestyle demands.

The present study, therefore, aims to investigate how students perceive and utilize instant noodles and frozen foods, the contexts in which they are consumed, and the motivations underlying these choices. By analyzing factors such as age, gender, level of education, academic stream, and type of residence, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the role of convenience foods in shaping student lifestyles.

2. Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its potential to contribute to both academic knowledge and practical interventions in the domain of student health and nutrition. At the academic level, the study adds to existing literature by focusing on a population group that is often overlooked in dietary research—college students—whose consumption habits are shaped by unique social and lifestyle conditions. Unlike general populations, students face specific constraints such as erratic schedules, exam pressures, limited financial resources, and restricted cooking access, making their relationship with convenience foods particularly relevant.

From a practical perspective, the findings of this study can inform universities, hostel administrators, and policymakers about the growing reliance on instant and frozen foods. By identifying the factors that drive consumption—such as quick preparation, taste, and affordability—institutions can design interventions that address these needs without compromising health. For example, campus canteens can introduce affordable, quick-to-prepare but nutritionally balanced options that compete with instant food in terms of convenience. Hostel facilities can also be upgraded to allow simple cooking, reducing over-dependence on packaged meals.

For the food industry, the study highlights an opportunity to innovate healthier versions of convenience foods that align with the health-consciousness emerging among students. With a significant portion of respondents expressing willingness to shift to healthier alternatives if they were accessible and affordable, manufacturers can focus on reformulating products with lower sodium, added nutrients, and natural ingredients.

Finally, the study holds significance for public health, as eating patterns adopted during student years often persist into adulthood. By understanding and addressing the factors behind the growing popularity of

instant and frozen foods, the study contributes to promoting healthier lifestyles and preventing long-term health risks associated with poor dietary habits.

3. Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study arises from the increasing reliance of students on instant noodles and frozen foods as a result of time constraints, financial limitations, and limited access to cooking facilities. While these foods provide affordability, taste, and convenience, they are often high in sodium, preservatives, and fats, raising concerns about their nutritional value and long-term health implications. Interestingly, many students are aware of these drawbacks yet continue to consume them, reflecting a gap between health knowledge and actual food choices. This situation is further complicated by demographic and contextual factors such as age, gender, level of education, academic stream, and type of residence. For example, hostel residents and undergraduates are more dependent on convenience foods compared to students living with families or postgraduates who may have more resources and experience in managing diets. Male students also tend to favor quick, ready-to-eat meals, while female students are more cautious about health. Despite these differences, instant noodles and frozen foods have become a shared element of student life, reflecting broader structural issues such as demanding schedules and affordability. However, limited research has examined how these intersecting factors influence consumption and perceptions, leaving a gap in understanding the balance between convenience, affordability, and health. This study, therefore, seeks to address the problem of overreliance on instant and frozen foods among students and to explore whether healthier alternatives, if made accessible and affordable, could shift current usage patterns.

4. Literature Review

Several studies have explored the increasing reliance of students on convenience foods such as instant noodles and frozen items. Kumar and Devi (2019) observed that affordability and accessibility make such foods especially popular among Indian students, while Park et al. (2020) highlighted that frequent noodle consumption among Korean students significantly raised sodium intake levels, posing health risks. Nambiar and Seshadri (2021) noted that hostel residents are particularly dependent on ready-to-eat meals, unlike students living with families who have easier access to home-cooked food. Gender also plays a role; Smith and Thomas (2018) found that male students often prefer low-preparation foods, whereas female students tend to be more health-conscious. Academic stress has also been identified as a major factor, with Raj and Menon (2020) reporting that undergraduate students facing heavy workloads are more likely to consume instant foods. Health organizations such as the World Health Organization (2019) have cautioned against excessive processed food consumption, associating it with risks like obesity, hypertension, and digestive issues. Choudhary (2021) suggested that students try to balance convenience and health by incorporating fresh fruits or sandwiches when possible. Similarly, Banerjee (2022), in the context of the Maggi ban in India, found that despite health concerns, students continued to prefer instant noodles primarily for their convenience and taste. Together, these studies reveal a consistent pattern: while students are aware of health implications, lifestyle demands, affordability, and accessibility strongly shape their food choices.

5. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the demographic profile of students consuming instant noodles and frozen foods.
2. To identify the frequency and contexts of consumption.
3. To explore perceptions of healthiness associated with these foods.
4. To analyze the influence of academic streams, living arrangements, and education level on consumption patterns.
5. To provide suggestions for healthier and practical alternatives.

6. Analysis and Interpretations

The majority of participants are in the **18–20 age group**, which typically corresponds to undergraduate students. This indicates that instant noodles and frozen food consumption patterns are being primarily captured among younger students who may have limited cooking skills, tight academic schedules, and a preference for quick and convenient meals. The smaller proportion of older students (21–30) may already have developed more diverse eating habits or better access to resources for cooking.

The study sample is **male-dominated**. This gender distribution may influence findings since prior research shows that male students often display a stronger inclination toward **convenient, low-preparation foods** like instant noodles and frozen items. Female students, while fewer in number, may reflect different perspectives, such as being more health-conscious or selective in food choices.

The dominance of this demographic suggests that **instant noodles and frozen foods are integral to student life**, primarily due to affordability, ease of preparation, and time constraints.

Perceptions of healthiness, frequency of usage, and lifestyle impacts derived from this study should be interpreted in the context of this specific age-gender distribution.

In the context of the study “**Instant noodles, frozen foods and student lifestyle: perception and usage patterns**,” the respondents represented a wide range of academic streams including commerce (B.Com, BBA, Economics), engineering (B.Tech across various specializations), medical (MBBS), applied psychology, and other courses such as BCA, Statistics, Visual Communication, and Physics. This diversity highlights that the consumption of instant and frozen foods cuts across disciplines, though the motivations and perceptions differ. Commerce and engineering students, often burdened with busy academic schedules and hostel or PG life, tend to rely heavily on such foods for convenience, affordability, and time efficiency. Medical students, despite similar workload pressures, may use these foods as quick fillers but are likely to be more conscious of their health implications. Applied psychology students, on the other hand, may approach consumption with greater awareness of lifestyle balance and nutritional concerns, while students from other disciplines display varied patterns shaped more by living arrangements, peer influence, and availability. Institution-specific mentions also suggest that the campus environment and food accessibility play a key role. Overall, the findings indicate that while instant noodles and frozen foods are common to

student life across streams, the underlying perceptions and usage patterns are influenced by academic demands, health awareness, and contextual factors.

A striking **92.8% of respondents are undergraduates**, while only **7.2% are postgraduates**. This shows that the study predominantly reflects the habits of undergraduate students, a group typically managing new independence, time constraints, and budget limitations. These factors make them more inclined toward **instant noodles and frozen foods as convenient, affordable meal substitutes**. The small proportion of postgraduates, though more experienced, may reflect **slightly different perceptions**, such as being more critical of health aspects and less dependent on ready-to-eat options.

Regarding residence, **31.9% live in hostels**, **23.2% live in rented accommodations**, and **44.9% live with family**. Hostel residents, with limited cooking access, are the most likely to rely on **instant noodles and frozen foods as everyday essentials**, especially for late-night or between-class meals. Students in rented accommodations, although having some cooking freedom, still lean on these foods (**23.2%**) due to time pressure and cost efficiency. In contrast, the largest group—those living with families (**44.9%**)—have easier access to home-cooked meals, which reduces dependency, though they may still consume convenience foods for taste, novelty, or quick snacks.

The responses show that **53.6% consume instant noodles occasionally**, **21.7% consume once a week**, and **18.8% consume 2–3 times a week**, while a very small percentage consume them **daily**, and the rest report **never consuming**. This indicates that instant noodles are a **common but not daily staple** in most students' diets. The majority rely on them as an occasional or weekly food choice rather than a primary meal option, reflecting their role as a **convenient backup or indulgence food** rather than a core dietary component.

Among 56 respondents, the majority (**55.4%**) consume instant noodles **as a snack**, showing that they are primarily viewed as a quick, light food option rather than a main meal. **16.1% consume them late at night while studying**, emphasizing their role in meeting academic lifestyle needs, especially during extended study hours. Smaller groups consume them **when short on time (14.3%)**, **as a regular meal replacement (12.5%)**, or **during travel (1.8%)**. These patterns highlight that instant noodles are strongly associated with **convenience, time constraints, and student routines**, particularly during study or leisure times.

Among the respondents, **53.6% reported consuming instant noodles occasionally**, **21.7% consume them once a week**, and **18.8% consume them 2–3 times a week**. Only a very small proportion consume them **daily**, while a minority do not consume them at all. This indicates that instant noodles are not a staple food but are instead treated as a **casual or supplementary option**. The high occasional usage suggests that students turn to instant noodles mainly in situations of convenience or need, rather than as part of their regular diet.

When asked about specific contexts of consumption, the majority (**55.4%**) stated they consume instant noodles **as a snack**, making it the most common purpose. Meanwhile, **16.1% consume them late at night while studying**, highlighting the association between academic routines and convenience foods. Smaller groups reported consumption **when short on time (14.3%)**, **as a regular meal replacement (12.5%)**, and **during travel (1.8%)**. These responses suggest that instant noodles are strongly linked to **time-saving, flexibility, and situational needs**, rather than being viewed as a full, balanced meal.

the study indicates that student consumption of instant and frozen foods is primarily driven by practicality rather than external influence. The bar chart titled "Why do you prefer instant/frozen food?" clearly shows that the top two reasons are **"Quick to prepare"** (75%) and **"Taste"** (62.5%), with **"Inexpensive"** (35.7%) being the third most common reason. This suggests that for students, these foods serve a functional purpose: saving time and money without a significant compromise on flavor. In contrast, factors like a lack of cooking skills or influence from peers and advertising are not major drivers, highlighting that the choice to consume these foods is a conscious decision based on immediate, personal needs.

The study also reveals a complex perception of healthiness regarding these foods. The pie chart titled "How healthy do you consider these foods?" shows that the majority of respondents (51.8%) view them as **"Somewhat healthy"**. This finding is particularly insightful because it indicates that students don't necessarily see these foods as entirely bad for them. Instead of viewing them as "unhealthy," a large portion of students holds a more moderate, or "neutral" view. This perception of moderate healthiness, combined with the primary motivators of convenience and taste, helps to explain why students continue to consume these foods despite any known nutritional drawbacks.

Majority of students are aware of the nutritional contents of instant and frozen foods. When asked if they are aware of the presence of sodium, preservatives, and fats, **42.9% said "Yes,"** and another **37.5% said "Somewhat."** This demonstrates a high level of health consciousness among students; over 80% have at least some awareness of what's in their food. This awareness, however, does not directly lead to healthier choices, as shown by the other charts.

The majority of students (**62.5%**) reported that the consumption of these foods has had **"Not noticeable"** effects on their health (digestion, weight, energy levels). A small percentage reported a negative effect (**12.5%**), while a notable portion (**21.4%**) was **"Not sure"**. These results demonstrate a disconnect between general health knowledge and perceived personal impact. The fact that most students do not notice any negative health effects, combined with the strong drivers of convenience and taste, helps explain why these foods are a popular choice despite any potential nutritional drawbacks.

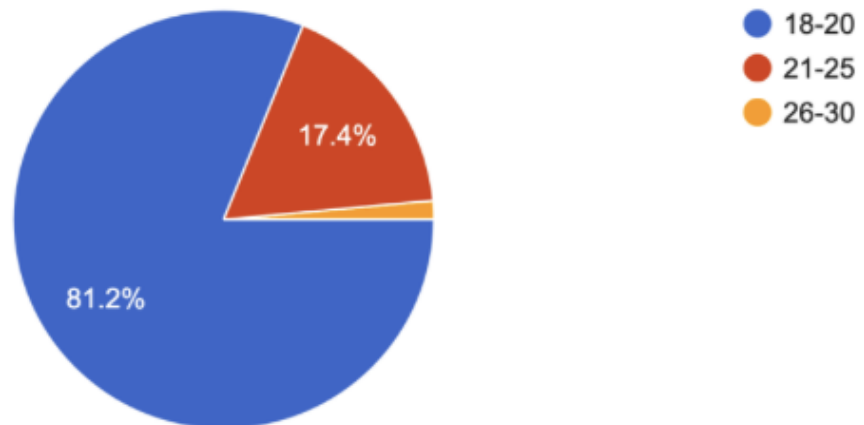
The study on student lifestyle and food choices reveals a clear link between a lack of time and the preference for instant and frozen foods. The bar chart shows that **75%** of students prefer these foods because they are **"Quick to prepare,"** making it the most significant factor. This finding is strongly supported by the pie chart, where a combined **75%** of respondents feel they have **"No"** (**33.9%**) or only **"Sometimes"** (**41.1%**) enough time to cook fresh meals. This suggests that students' reliance on convenient food is a direct result of their demanding schedules.

The study shows that **57.1%** of students would **"Definitely"** switch if the alternatives were **affordable and quick to prepare**, with another **41.1%** saying **"Maybe."** This indicates that the core reasons for their current food choices are not a lack of health awareness or desire, but rather a lack of accessible and practical alternatives that fit their busy, budget-conscious lifestyles.

The study indicates a diversity in their quick meal habits, with **"Homemade food"** (**33.9%**) being the most common alternative, followed by **"Fresh fruits"** (**23.2%**) and **"Bread/ sandwich"** (**21.4%**). This suggests that while lifestyle constraints push students toward instant and frozen foods, they also actively seek out and consume healthier or home-prepared alternatives when possible, reflecting a balance between convenience and a desire for more wholesome options.

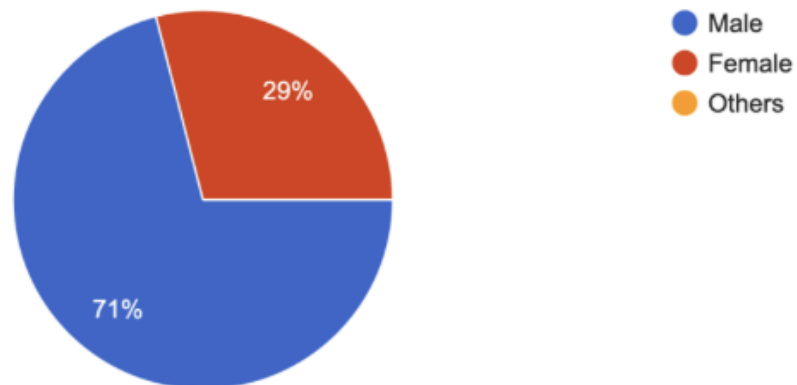
Age

69 responses



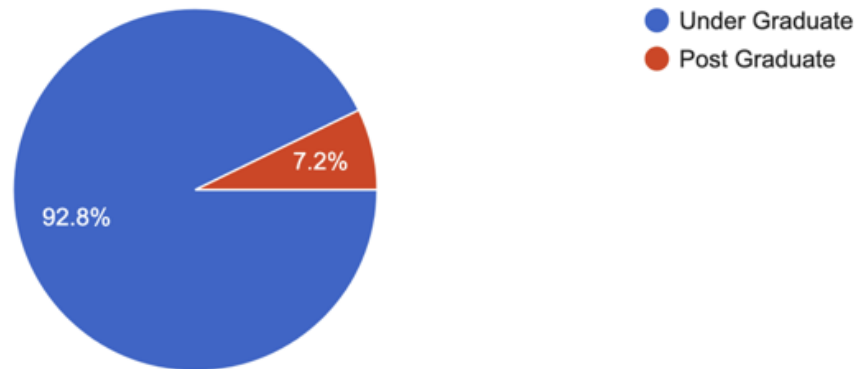
Gender

69 responses



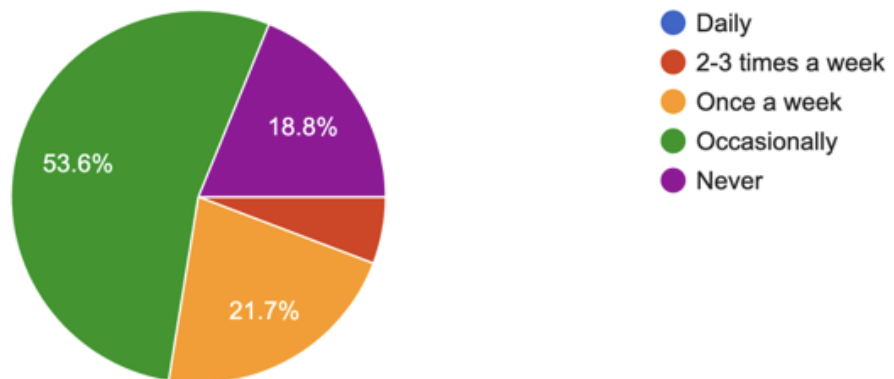
Level of Education

69 responses



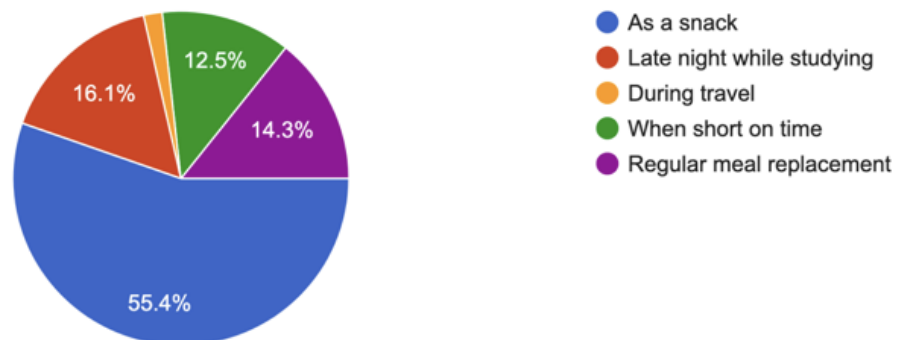
How often do you consume instant noodles

69 responses



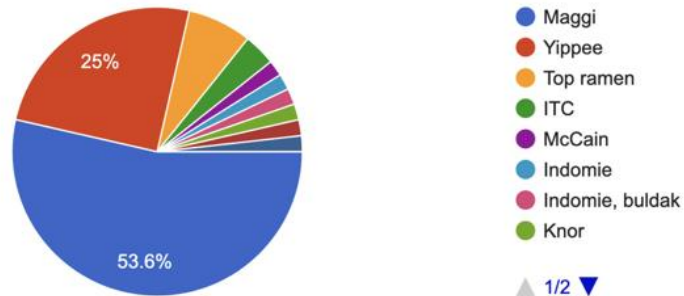
When do you consume?

56 responses



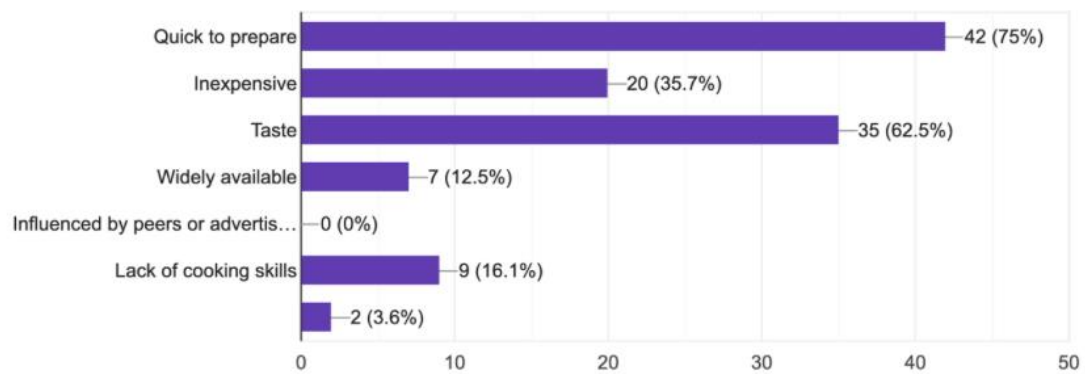
What is your most preferred instant/frozen food brand ?

56 responses



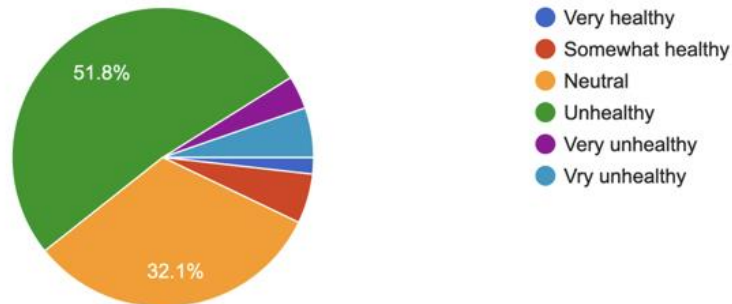
Why do you prefer instant/frozen food?

56 responses



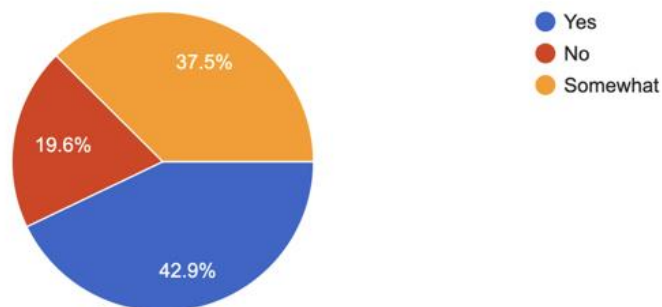
How healthy do you consider these foods?

56 responses



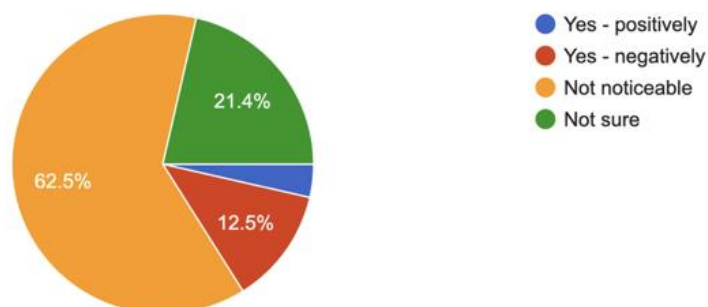
Are you aware of the nutritional contents?(Sodium, preservatives, fats)

56 responses



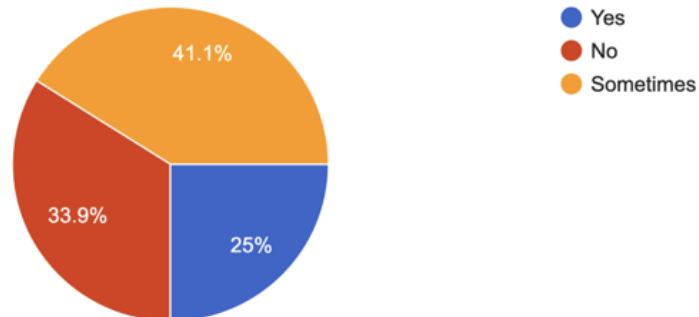
Has consumption of these foods affected your health in any way?(Digestion, weight energy levels)

56 responses



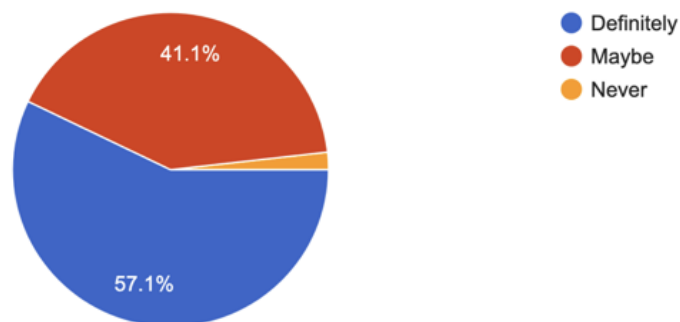
Do you feel like your current lifestyle leaves you with enough time to cook fresh meals?

56 responses



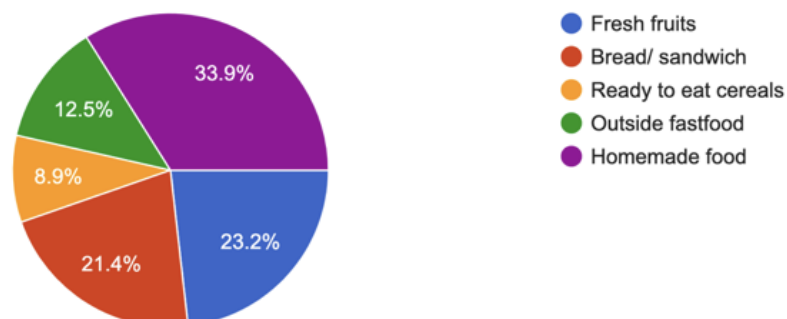
Would you switch to healthier alternatives if they were affordable and quick to prepare?

56 responses



What alternative quick meals do you consume besides instant/frozen foods?

56 responses



Major Findings

Undergraduate male students dominate the sample, shaping consumption patterns.

Convenience and taste outweigh health concerns as primary motivators.

Hostellers and PG residents consume more instant foods than students living with families.

Instant noodles are primarily snacks or study-time fillers rather than full meals.

Students hold a “neutral” view of healthiness, acknowledging drawbacks but continuing consumption.

Awareness of preservatives and sodium is high, but it does not significantly reduce usage.

Students would willingly shift to healthier alternatives if they matched affordability and convenience.

7. Conclusion

The study concludes that instant noodles and frozen foods are deeply integrated into student lifestyles, primarily as supplementary and convenience-driven choices. Despite awareness of potential health risks, students continue consumption due to affordability, quick preparation, and taste. Consumption patterns vary by academic stream, residence, and lifestyle factors. Importantly, students show openness to healthier substitutes, provided they are budget-friendly and time-efficient.

8. Suggestions

Based on the findings, several measures can be suggested to address the growing dependence on instant and frozen foods among students. Educational institutions should provide affordable and healthier alternatives in canteens to reduce reliance on packaged foods. Nutrition awareness campaigns, workshops, and health education programs can be introduced to shift perceptions from neutral acceptance to more health-conscious choices. Food manufacturers can innovate by developing healthier versions of instant foods, such as products with lower sodium content, added fiber, or fortified nutrients, without compromising on convenience or taste. Hostels and student accommodations should also be equipped with basic cooking facilities, enabling students to prepare simple, healthier meals. On a broader level, policy interventions like stricter food labeling regulations and responsible advertising can guide students toward informed decision-making. Together, these steps can help balance the need for convenience with the importance of health in student lifestyles.

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