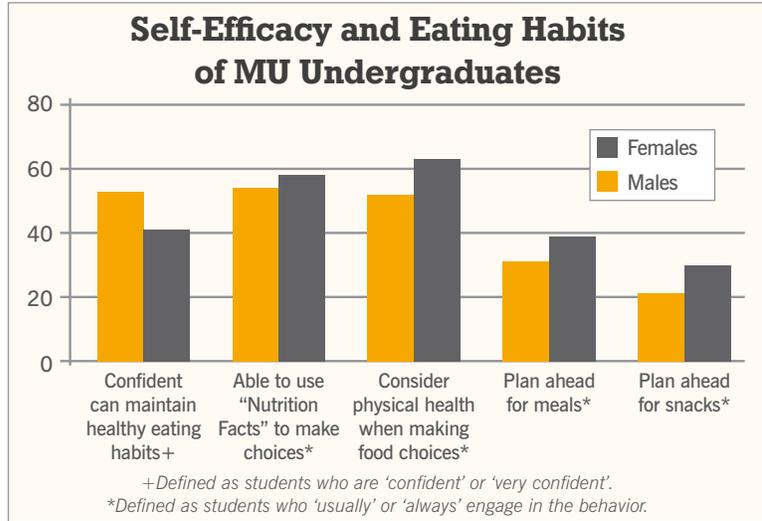




# Wellness Brief: Self-Efficacy and Eating Habits: Variations Between Males and Females

## Introduction

The MU Campus Health and Safety Survey (MUCHSS), formerly called the Wellness Survey, is distributed annually to University of Missouri undergraduate students and provides insight into student health behaviors. The following data from the 2013 MUCHSS (N=945) illustrate the differences between males and females as it pertains to their self-efficacy in regards to eating healthy, and their eating habits. Self-efficacy is a way of measuring one’s belief that he or she is capable of attaining a specific goal, and it can be used to measure a variety of health-related perceptions. The MUCHSS uses content-specific questions regarding students’ perceived confidence levels to measure self-efficacy.



Planning ahead is one of the strongest predictors of healthy eating behaviors and is associated with lower food costs (Strong et al., 2008). The power of planning ahead allows one to refrain from the temptations of impulse buying, eat a more varied diet, and helps to prevent against under or overeating which can result in negative health implications on the body. Meal planning saves college students precious time and money. Despite the overwhelming benefits to planning ahead when it comes to food, only 36% of MU students regularly plan ahead for meals and only 26% plan ahead for snacks.

Utilizing the nutrition facts label allows one to determine the amount of nutrients you get throughout the day and compare one product to another (USDA, 2006). Furthermore, considering one’s physical health when making food choices can result in better eating habits.

## Findings

According to the 2013 MUCHSS, almost half of MU students (46%) are confident that they can maintain healthy eating habits on a regular basis. However, when examining the differences between males and females, we can see self-efficacy among males is about 26% higher than that of females. 63% of females consider their physical health when making food choices as opposed to 52% of males. Females are 35% more likely to plan ahead for snacks than their male counterparts. Additionally, females are 23% more likely to plan ahead for meals than males. Although the difference is less pronounced, 58% of females are able to use nutrition facts labels compared to 54% of males.

Health behavior change interventions aimed at college students should instill skills in goal setting, planning, and self-monitoring, while incorporating social and environmental support to facilitate adherence and the long-term adoption of healthy behavior (Strong et al., 2008). It is recommended that nutrition programs at the University of Missouri take into consideration the gender disparity when it comes to self-efficacy and eating habits. Programs that address issues surrounding confidence in maintaining healthy eating behaviors may help mitigate these differences between males and females and result in a more effective intervention.

## Discussion

Interestingly, although males have higher self-efficacy with regards to eating healthy, females tend to engage in healthy eating behaviors (considering physical health when making food choices, and planning ahead for meals and snacks) more often than males, and are slightly more able to use food nutrition labels than males. This is surprising because one might expect those with higher self-efficacy to also have better healthy eating habits and vice versa.

### References

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USDA. (2006). Department of Health and Human Services. Nutrition Facts Label. Retrieved from: <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/downloads/nutritionfactslabel.pdf>.

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