



Relationship between physical activity levels and risk behaviors in Brazilian University students

Relação entre os níveis de atividade física e comportamentos de risco de estudantes Universitários Brasileiros

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationship between physical activity and risky behaviors of Brazilian undergraduate students. The sample comprised 63 students (23.48 ± 7.29) from Accounting Sciences, Physical Education, and Physics courses at Federal University of Mato Grosso. Online versions of the IPAQ and NCHRBBS questionnaires were used to assess physical activity levels and risky behaviors, respectively. Data was reported as frequencies for the categories in each instrument, and chi-square test was used for inferential analysis. Results indicated that 52% of students were active and 18% were sedentary. In the comparison between the fields of study, the Physical Education students showed better eating habits related to the consumption of fruits and fruit juice (83%). It is concluded that there was no direct relationship between physical activity levels and risk behaviors. However, more positive physical activity and nutrition behaviors were observed among Physical Education students.

Keywords: Health Risk Behavior; Life Style; Physical Activity; University Student.

RESUMO

Este estudo objetivou-se investigar os níveis de atividade física e os comportamentos de risco de estudantes de graduação. Participaram 63 estudantes ($23,5 \pm 6$ anos) dos cursos de Ciências Contábeis, Educação Física e Física da Universidade Federal do Mato Grosso. Versões online dos questionários IPAQ e NCHRBBS foram utilizados para acessar níveis de atividade física e comportamentos de risco, respectivamente. A análise descritiva utilizou-se de frequência das categorias evidenciadas em cada instrumento e para análise inferencial, utilizou-se o teste qui-quadrado com $p < 0.05$. Observou-se que 52% dos acadêmicos mostraram-se ativos e 18% sedentários. Na comparação entre as áreas de conhecimento, o curso de Educação Física apresentou melhores hábitos alimentares relacionados ao consumo de frutas e suco de frutas (83%). Conclui-se que não houve uma relação direta entre os níveis de atividade física e comportamentos de risco. Entretanto, comportamentos mais positivos referente a atividade física e alimentação foram observados entre os estudantes da curso de Educação Física.

Palavras-chave: Atividade Física; Comportamentos de Risco à Saúde; Estilo de vida; Estudante Universitário.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education grew by an average of 32.8% students admissions between 2011 and 2021, and it is estimated that there are 8.9 million academics enrolled in Brazil¹. Starting a university course can represent a complex moment due to the vulnerabilities experienced by students, who frequently need to reconcile academic activities with personal and professional activities. Scientific evidence even indicates that university students' lifestyle evolves negatively throughout the course².

The embracement of risky behaviors is responsible for a significant portion of morbidity and mortality among university students³. A study with university students in the United Kingdom⁴, identify that a small proportion of students had positive health practices such as consuming fruits/vegetables and carrying out physical activity. Furthermore, the research showed that the vast majority of participants consume excessive alcoholic beverages and use illicit drugs.

In this sense, researchers have made efforts to investigate and understand risky behaviors among university students. Another study investigated students from a university in Jordan and demonstrated that the most prevalent risk behaviors were poor dietary and lifestyle habits, suggesting that nutrition and health education programs and increasing physical activity levels would reduce the prevalence of overweight and obesity². On the other hand, a study conducted with Italian university students⁵ observed that the initiation of certain risky behaviors, particularly excessive alcohol consumption or the use of illicit drugs such as marijuana, negatively influenced the engagement in other risky behaviors (e.g., sexual behaviors). Despite the investigation of various undergraduate groups in other countries, there is still a need for further studies at the national level and comparisons between fields of study, which this the gap addressed by the present study.

Various risky behaviors within the university environment can be observed, directly affecting the maintenance of a healthy lifestyle. Likewise, the lifestyle established by individuals since childhood significantly influences the acquisition or not of future diseases, especially chronic non-communicable diseases, which

represent around 70% of all deaths in the world and are associated with health expenditure by governments^{6,7}. From this perspective, the level of physical activity represents an essential factor related to well-being and quality of life, since, according to data from the World Health Organization, 3.2 million deaths per year in the world are attributed to physical inactivity⁸. However, it is evident that the resumption of activities post-COVID-19, particularly among university students, combined with the ability to seek, comprehend, and evaluate health information through electronic media (e-health literacy), can promote healthy behaviors and well-being⁹.

Considering the increasing university population in Brazil and the vulnerability of university students to adopt risky behaviors, there is a growing interest in investigating these subjects throughout the national territory. Although several national⁶ and international¹⁰ studies address risk behavior in university students, it has been shown that there is a lack of studies that observe the students' level of physical activity and risk behaviors based on their fields of study. In this sense, understanding how physical activity levels relate to the development of risk behaviors is crucial in the pursuit of greater health among university students. The findings of this study may prompt increased attention to the health of university students, enabling the development of programs or interventions aimed at enhancing lifestyle and preventing risky behaviors related to nutrition, the use of legal and illegal substances, physical activity, sexual education, and traffic safety. Thus, the objective of the present study is to investigate the levels of physical activity and risk behaviors of undergraduate students from different fields of knowledge.

METHODS

The sample of this cross-sectional study consisted of university students in the 3rd and 4th semesters, of three undergraduate courses, from the Federal University of Mato Grosso (Mato Grosso, Brazil). The selection of courses was performed randomly, from the courses available in the institution. Initially, an invitation was sent

to directly to the course coordinators of six courses (Psychology, Veterinary Medicine, Physics, Accounting Sciences, Public Health, and Physical Education), two courses from each field of knowledge. However, only three courses agreed to participate in this research (Accounting Sciences, Physical Education, and Physics). The field of knowledge for each of the courses was determined according to the classification of major fields of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel - Exact and Earth Sciences (Physics); Applied Social Sciences (Accounting Sciences); Health Sciences (Physical Education).

The first and last year's students were not recruited because they represent, respectively, an adaptation phase and a transition phase to the job market. Therefore, first-year students may not yet have scientific knowledge about healthy habits and practices, and last year's students would have a greater commitment of time to on- and off-campus activities, such as internships, which could make data collection unfeasible¹¹.

The project was presented to the course coordinators to inform them about its objectives, methodology, and relevance. Data collection was conducted online using Google Forms. Contact with students was established through personal emails provided by the course coordinators following a request made through the institution's Electronic Information System (SEI). Prior to data collection, students were briefed on the project's details, including its objectives, methodology, and the associated risks and benefits. They were also informed about the research's anonymous nature and provided with the Informed Consent Form.

Inclusion criteria were: a) being over 18 years old, b) being regularly enrolled in the selected courses, and c) being in the second year of study. Exclusion criteria included: (a) incorrect completion of the data collection instrument, and/or (b) volunteers who did not meet one or more inclusion criteria.

The students' physical activity levels were assessed by the short version of the International Physical Activity Questionnaire (IPAQ), containing eight closed questions. The IPAQ was validated in Brazil¹² and participants responded to questions based on activities carried out in the week before the questionnaire was administered. The IPAQ classifies and conceptualizes the response

categories into: Sedentary; Irregularly Active A; Irregularly Active B; Active; and Very Active. The reliability of the questionnaire was $\alpha=0.87$, indicating strong reliability.

Risk behaviors were assessed by a modified reduced version of the National College Health Risk Behavior Survey (NCHRB), containing 34 closed questions. This questionnaire was developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and validated¹³. The instrument addresses topics such as safety and violence, the use of tobacco and alcoholic beverages, and nutrition. Two categories were not assessed (risky sexual behavior and suicidal behavior). Given the fact that this research was carried out online, there could be some type of embarrassment or fear of responding to these types of behaviors. The answers to the questionnaire were multiple choice and the university students should select the most appropriate option. For example, in question one about safety and violence, the following question is asked: "How often do you wear a seat belt when riding in a car in the front seat?" The answer options were: "a) Never; b) Rarely; c) Sometimes; d) Most of the time; and e) always".

This research was approved by the Health Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Mato Grosso, document n° 4.091.174, respecting Resolution 466/2012 of the National Health Council (CNS/MS), which regulates research involving human beings.

Data analysis was performed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The descriptive analysis was carried out using relative and absolute frequencies of the selected categories in the physical activity (sedentary, irregularly active, and active) and risk behavior (with risk behavior or without risk behavior) instruments. The association between courses and the two aforementioned variables was assessed by chi-square tests. All analyses were conducted using the SPSS 22.0 software, adopting a significance level of $p < 0.05$.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We contacted 167 second-year undergraduate students (Physics: $n = 60$;

Accounting Sciences: $n = 50$; Physical Education: $n = 57$). After contact, 21 students from the Accounting Sciences course (33%), 35 in the Physical Education course (56%), and 7 in the Physics course (7%) participated. It is noteworthy that the Physical Education and Accounting Sciences programs have a minimum duration of 4 years, divided into 8 semesters, while the Physics program has a duration of 4.5 years, totaling 9 semesters. Distribution by sex showed a prevalence of male participants (62%). Furthermore, among students, 52% of students classified themselves as physically active, 30% as irregularly active, and 18% as sedentary. Considering the percentages of irregularly active students and sedentary students, there is a large number of students who presented health risk factors related to physical inactivity (48%).

When comparing courses, Physical Education students were the most physically active (57%), followed by Accounting Sciences (52%) and Physics (29%) students. On an overall analysis, these results are also similar to those presented by Rodrigues, Cheik and Mayer¹⁴ who analyzed the level of physical activity among students at a University in Gurupi (TO), and found that 51.1% of these students were active, while 7.6% were sedentary.

On the other hand, Souza, Bonfante, Junior and Lopes¹⁵, investigated the physical activity levels of students from different health courses at a public university in Paraná and reported that 30% of university students were considered physically inactive or insufficiently active. Such results are similar to those reported in a review study by Guthold et al.¹⁶, indicating that 47% of the Brazilian population is physically inactive.

In the present study, we also identified that Physics students showed higher percentages

of sedentary lifestyles (57%) compared to the other courses. This result is in line with results from an investigation of Rio Grande do Sul University students¹⁷. In this study, similar values of sedentary lifestyle between the areas of knowledge were reported (Applied Social Sciences - 41.2%; Exact and Earth Sciences - 38.1%; Health Sciences - 37.7 %). This indicates that there is no consensus on which courses have the highest level of physical activity. Further studies are suggested to better understand the reasons for such levels of sedentary lifestyle observed in specific courses.

Previous research aimed to explore the reasons why university students do not engage in physically active behaviors¹¹. It is speculated that most students spend their daily time at the university, in classroom-related activities during graduation. Part-time students (morning, afternoon, or evening), on the other hand, carry out additional activities such as work, which results in less time to be involved with physical activities.

In the present study, a relationship between the area of study and the physical activity levels was found. This result may be associated with the profile of the course students and the knowledge about health benefits arising from physical activities as part of the curriculum itself, for Physical Education students¹¹. Despite that, Lansini et al.¹⁷, highlight that even when students are enrolled in a health area course and have access to information about the importance of physical activity, there is no guarantee for the acquisition of healthy habits, since habits are an individual choice. This notion may explain the divergences between the results of the studies previously presented. Table 1 presents the association between physical activity level and gender.

Table 1. Association between physical activity level and gender.

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Sex	Physical Activity Level						p
	Very active/Active		Irregularly active A/B		Sedentary		
	f	(%)	f	(%)	f	(%)	
Men	26	79	9	47	4	36	0.01*
en	7	21	10	53	7	64	
Age range**	23,0 ± 5,6		23,0 ± 5,9		23,1 ± 9,4		

**Mean, standard deviation. *Significant difference $p < 0.05$.

Physical activity levels data compared by sex showed that men are more active than women ($p < 0.01$). These findings are in line with other study involving students from the University of Brasília, that indicated sex as one of the factors associated with physical activity levels, with men showing higher average physical activity levels than women¹¹.

The difference in physical activity levels between sexes have been previously investigated, and some reasons for these differences have been proposed^{18,19}. For instance, women are engaged in less physical activity during leisure time, while other activities related to aesthetic and health benefits are preferred. On the other hand, men tend to prefer sports and group activities, behaviors that can already be observed in childhood and adolescence, whilst women are involved in games and activities with lower caloric expenditure¹⁹.

When analyzing risk behaviors related to imprudence in traffic, no statistically significant differences were observed between the courses ($p > 0.05$). Although most students wear a helmet when riding a motorcycle and a seat belt in the front seat, it was noted that some university students tend to adopt some reckless behaviors, such as not using a seat belt in the back seat (86% in Accounting Sciences, 71% in Physical Education, and 71% in Physics students). In this sense, using a seat belt reduces by 40 and 65% the risk of being thrown from a vehicle and suffering serious or fatal injuries²⁰. It is also noteworthy that 31% of our pool of students drank alcohol and drove a vehicle or rode in a vehicle in which the driver had consumed alcohol. Future research is

warranted to explore the factors influencing these behaviors across diverse academic fields of study.

No significant associations were found between courses for aggressive behavior. In fact, only one student from each course reported carrying a firearm or knife and less than two students were involved in physical fights. In another study carried out in Mato Grosso with elementary and high school students, no significant associations were identified, and the prevalence of violent behavior was 4.5% among young students²¹.

Regarding tobacco consumption, results show that 46% of university students have tried cigarettes at some point in their lives (38% Accounting Sciences, 49% Physical Education e 57% Physics). Despite that, 94% of students do not use tobacco recurrently, meaning that the risk behavior was not persistent. It is important to note that, despite the percentage differences among the courses regarding the aforementioned data, there was no association between them ($p = 0.33$). Similar results were observed in the study by Rodrigues, Cheik and Mayer¹⁴, whose prevalence of smoking among university students from Gurupi University (TO) across various graduations was 7.5%.

In the present study, we did not investigate the reasons that led to the habit of smoking, however, the results allowed the inference that university students from our sample are not concerned with social status and influences from friends. Additionally, the physical activity levels presented by them may be related to the non-usage of cigarettes, since practicing sports is a factor that does not favor tobacco consumption²².

A high percentage of alcoholic beverage consumption was identified among university students (57%) who participated in this study, with no association found between alcohol consumption and the courses (57% Accounting Sciences, 54% Physical Education, and 71% Physics). Similarly, a study conducted by Antoniassi Junior and Meneses-Gaya²³ with university students from a private institution in Minas Gerais found that 89.4% of students had consumed alcohol in their lifetime, and some users exhibited risky behaviors associated with drug use. Overall, studies indicate that alcohol consumption among young people generally initiates at social environments, such as parties, related to curiosity or the need for social acceptance from groups²⁴. In addition, alcohol is the substance most associated with other risk behaviors²⁵.

Small percentages of cannabis consumption (2%) were also identified among university students participating in this research. In a study carried out with medical students from a Federal University of Minas Gerais (MG), marijuana and cocaine use were observed²⁶. Among students from a university in Bahia²⁷ reported the use of marijuana (22.6%), cocaine and/or crack (3.1%), amphetamines and/or ecstasy (4.1%) and inhalants (3.1%). We hypothesize that evaluating more courses from each field may result in closer drug consumption values to those of the aforementioned studies.

Our results indicated that a large proportion of Accounting Sciences (0%), Physical Education (6%), and Physics (0%) students did

not present risky behaviors related to illicit drugs, since 98% of them do not use illicit drugs, with no association found among them. Drug use among this population is worrying, since in Brazil the number of higher education students has reached an estimated 8.9 million enrolled students¹. Indeed, academic demands may generate personal, interpersonal, and social problems that motivate the use of these illicit substances. These drugs, in turn, can affect the students' global sense, giving the impression of "well-being"¹²⁷.

When body self-description was assessed, we found that most of the Accounting Sciences (95%), Physical Education (86%), and Physics (100%) students indicated that they did not have the appropriate body weight. Actions related to body weight control were observed especially among Accounting Sciences and Physical Education students, who seek the most to gain or lose weight, both through diet (52% and 51%, respectively) and exercise (76% and 63%, respectively). This may indicate a greater concern with health or body aesthetics. It is worth noting that Physics students (100%), who described an unhealthy weight, are those who undertake fewer diets and exercises to maintain or lose body weight (71%), presenting greater risk behavior related to body weight. Similarly, the study by Vargas et al.²⁸ with university students from Itararé (SP), also observed that university students with the greatest dissatisfaction with their body weight are those with the lowest level of physical activity. Table 2 shows the association of dietary risk factors among students from different undergraduate courses.

Table 2. Association of dietary risk factors among students from different undergraduate courses.

Inadequate eating		Accounting Sciences		Physical Education		Physics		P
	RB	F	(%)	F	(%)	F	(%)	
31. Did you eat fruits or drink fruit juices yesterday?	Yes	9	43	6	17	4	57	0,03*
	No	12	57	29	83	3	43	
32. Did you eat green salads or cooked vegetables yesterday?	Yes	4	19	9	26	3	43	0,45
	No	17	81	26	74	4	57	
	Yes	17	81	28	80	6	86	0,94

33. Did you eat a hamburger, hot dog, coxinha, empadinha, chips, or French fries yesterday?	No	4	19	7	20	1	14	
34. Did you eat cookies, pies, cakes, or candies yesterday?	Yes	7	33	15	43	3	43	0,77
	No	14	67	20	57	4	57	

*Significant difference, $p < 0.05$. RB - Risk behavior.

In the present study, it was observed that university students did not present regular healthy eating habits, which is worrying, as a diet poor in whole grains, fruits, and vegetables is associated with increased exposure to chronic diseases risk. However, Physical Education students showed a higher consumption of fruit or fruit juices than university students of other courses (83%) ($p < 0.05$). These students may have presented healthier habits in their daily lives, mainly due to their area of knowledge, having curricular subjects that deal with the concepts of health education and the importance of a healthy lifestyle²⁹. This result presented by Physical Education students may also be related to the observations of Feitosa et al.³⁰ that analyze students' food habits from a Brazilian Northwest Public University who indicated an improvement in the consumption of protective foods, such as fruits, as the course goes on.

No associations between risk behaviors and physical activity levels were found in the present study. Alcohol was the most consumed drug among students, and high physical activity levels were not a protective factor against this behavior. Some studies describe the relationship between adequate eating habits and higher physical activity levels¹⁵, however, the high physical activity level was not decisive for better eating habits in this study.

This study presents some limitations. One of them concerns the fact that a single course represented each field of study, due to the refusal of three courses to participate, reducing the sample. The low student participation and the way data was collected using an online platform also contributed to the small sample. We believe that the lack of direct and personal contact with students may have interfered with explaining the importance of this research topic.

The findings of this study aim to stimulate reflection on risk behaviors and levels of physical activity. The practical implications include prompting university administrators and educators across different fields of study to address these issues, aiming to mitigate and prevent risky behaviors while promoting healthier lifestyles. Furthermore, the implementation of health programs tailored to the university community to foster these objectives is warranted.

CONCLUSION AND FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

On the overall, results indicated that the majority of students presented satisfactory behavior regarding physical activity. The comparison between the three fields of study showed lower physical activity levels for Exact and Earth Sciences students, compared to Health Sciences students. Health Sciences students also presented more positive results regarding nutrition.

Positive behaviors related to smoking, use of illicit drugs, and aggressive behaviors were observed in the three fields of study investigated, indicating that university students may be more aware of these lifestyle aspects. On the other hand, reckless traffic behavior and alcohol consumption were the most frequent risk behaviors observed among university students. There was no direct relationship between physical activity levels and risk behaviors.

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