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ND605

Food and Cultural Competency in Lifecycle Nutrition

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Judaism Topic Report

I chose to select Judaism as my cultural/ religious group and I will focus on the kosher or Kashrut guidelines, but more importantly, how it could affect dietary practices. While this is one group, it has a very diverse global community that includes many subgroups that vary in traditions, adherence, and practices. While all groups adherence to kosher may vary, these rules dictate which foods, preparations methods and consumption practices are allowed and can influence their lives, holidays, and health outcomes.¹ I chose this topic because I have distant family that followed this religion and its practices when they lived in Europe. I have researched some of my family history and their practices in the past, but I thought this would be a great opportunity to learn more about the food practices and traditions. Before I delve into this religious group further, I wanted to mention again that this community may strictly follow, these guidelines while others follow some of the rules or none of them, but it all depends on their personal interpretation and religious beliefs.

The Jewish dietary traditions are shaped by religious beliefs derived from the Torah, which I was aware of, but I did not know it from the books Leviticus and Deuteronomy.² These set the rules for holiness and separation. If you see the term Kosher or Kashrut on a food label, it could be from one of the dozens certifying organizations but if it's for Passover, it could be a completely different label. There are many rules for kosher but at the basic level it is the prohibition of

certain animals and foods items. For instance, land animals must have cloven hooves or chew their cud (e.g., cows are allowed but pigs are not), seafood must have fins and scales (e.g., salmon is allowed but shellfish like mussels are not), and birds cannot be predatory (e.g., chicken is allowed but eagles are not). While thinking of this, I can imagine some of the difficulty in deciphering some of the grey areas of all these animals. Moving on from the animals themselves, the blood must be drained from the meat through salting or soaking because this symbolizes the removal of the life force, and that meat cannot mix directly with dairy. In context, imagine you are eating a cheeseburger, this would not be allowed because the cheese is dairy, and the patty is animal meat.¹ But again, there is grey areas, and while you can eat both, you must use different utensils or wait between each meal. Then they have other rules surrounding grains, bread, fruits, and vegetables but they all are generally considered kosher in the “unprocessed” form and if processed using non-kosher equipment they are no longer kosher. Just as with the general definitions of processing it could bring up a lot of gray areas.¹ This is the main constructs of the food-based rules but there are other rules that revolve around timing and how they eat.

Beyond the daily practices, a person may participate in fasting periods like the 25 hours fast called Yom Kippur and Tisha B’Av, which is a day to commemorate the temples destruction. Both of these traditions can interrupt the normal eating patterns to participate in these traditions but while many cultures and religions have a fasting like ritual there may be situations that the person practicing can make adjustment to these traditions because of health or life circumstances.³ Throughout the world, somehow most traditional diets are well constructed and they are usually well balanced and fit for the traditional environment those cultures lived in. The traditional Jewish meals are well balanced and shaped around community/ family, especially on certain days like Shabbat. This is the day of rest and is observed on Friday into Saturday, where

they structure their meals around family and each subgroup of Judaism consume different types of meals during this day of rest. While each group may differ in their food selections, they mostly all believe that the food they consume is a conduit for holiness or kedushah. The aspect of Kosher is tied to ethical; health and spiritual rationale and these traditions also fosters gratitude by blessing both before and after meals.⁴

As the world keeps advancing with technology and global connectiveness, these cultures and traditions have also expanded as well. These changes have made kosher-certified products available worldwide and year-round but with important and controversial changes among some of the groups. These changes have introduced the kosher certification into the “processed food” market, which many believe that it is taking away from home cooking and community-based foundation.³ As the population and demand for food continues to increase, the urbanization has reduced the traditional farming ties to a more supermarket and restaurant-based life. These traditions are also affected by socioeconomic factors that may lead lower income families to alter their kosher meals to fit their budget because kosher meats can cost 30% or more than average meats.⁵ Because of these constraints, many who practice, have moved more towards a hybridized diet that many believe promote convenience but lose their traditional culture by blending current diet trends or traditions with their religion.³

While most traditions and religious may have their own perceived nutritional benefits and challenges, Judaism’s kosher aspect aligns with this belief. Kosher has a strong foundation in whole foods and when I went through its aspects, it reminded me of the Mediterranean like diet because of its foods that promote lower saturated fats and balance. By having to separate certain foods or take time between these meals can encourage timing and portion control. But this is my own interpretation of how it could be beneficial but there are some challenges to these traditions.

As I mentioned before, each subgroup may have their own benefits and challenges, but taking a broad brush to this group, if they follow the slaughtering rules, they can risk having an Iron Deficiency and anemia. But also, if they follow the dairy restrictions, they can risk a calcium deficiency and the last challenge can come from the fasting events, as I mentioned before, this includes abstaining from all food and drink but there is a clause within this, that I think is insightful. The clause is, if there is a threat to life or health, that person is allowed to choose not to adhere to these restrictions.⁴ Although there may be benefits and challenges to these restrictions, we as dietitians, should understand all aspects to help build a client driven counseling session. If we become informed on these practices, we could offer alternatives to certain aspects of their diet that still aligns with their beliefs. While we may be knowledgeable about nutrition, being able to seek outside resources to give us guidance only strengthens our ability to practice and help give our clients the best care possible.

Throughout the life cycle these traditions can have challenges that can have a different impact depending on adherence, age, gender, and access. During pregnancy, the mother may choose to fast or follow other rules that could put the mother and the child at risk. After birth, and during infancy, breastfeeding aligns with traditions but finding a formula that is kosher could have a financial strain and put the child at risk as well. As we move through childhood, implementing these restrictions could cause the child to refuse certain foods that could lead to nutrient gaps. In adulthood, it could be challenging to balance work and some of traditions but also trying to obtain fresh kosher foods could cause socioeconomic stress and increase chronic disease risk because of over relying on “processed alternatives.”⁶ In all life cycles, the fasting tradition could pose a risk, but the tradition does have a community-based reliance which could help mitigate or worsen the health outcomes.

While I was serving in the military, the kosher meals that were offered began my journey of misinformation and cultural incompetence. I thought these meals were healthier and had better nutritional profiles from what I was told by my peers. This is what I see today on Instagram and other social media outlets when it comes to influencers. I notice when they mention terms like “cleaner” or have more nutritional benefits and these messages are usually targeted at half-conscious consumers. But these claims are inaccurate because just like with most diets, it’s about having an evidence-based approach and not believing the health claims. While kosher has plenty of aspects that has potential to be beneficial, the diet should be tailored to the person and not the person to the diet. These types of messages could be damaging in several ways, either by cost, restrictive eating behaviors or could lead to deficiencies.

Resources

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