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Dietary patterns among Australian women at different stages of the life-course

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Background – Food intakes and dietary patterns are known to vary with age but there has been little work investigating whether distinct dietary patterns exist at different stages of the life-course among women.

Objectives – To assess variations in dietary patterns between two age cohorts of Australian women and assess the variations according to socio-demographic and behavioural characteristics.

Design – Dietary intake was assessed using a 74-item food frequency questionnaire among women aged 50-55 years (n=10580; “mid-age”) in 2001 and aged 25-30 years (n=7460; “young”) in 2003, from the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health. Dietary patterns were identified using factor analysis.

Outcomes – Five similar dietary patterns were identified for each age group. The main differences related to meat and fish consumption. Patterns emerging among the young women were labeled “semi-vegetarian”, “fruit”, “vegetables & meat”, “high fat foods and snacks” and “reduced fat dairy”. Among the mid-age women, the dietary patterns were labeled “vegetables”, “vegetarian”, “fruit & fish”, “high fats foods, snacks and meat” and “reduced fat dairy”. Dietary patterns among young women were associated with education and smoking status, whereas the patterns among mid-age women showed fewer associations and were more likely to be associated with region of residence. For both the young and mid age women, the “reduced fat dairy” pattern was associated with physical activity.

Conclusion – Future follow-up of these cohorts will help identify whether these differences are age or cohort effects and the impact of these differences on chronic disease outcomes.