

Income loss and diet quality during the first COVID-19 lockdown in a UK and Australian sample: the role of distress as a potential mediator

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The first global COVID-19 lockdown saw an increase in weight gain and consumption of foods typically considered less healthy (more processed goods and less fresh produce). Many individuals also experienced cuts to their salaries and increased emotional distress during this period. The current study sought to establish if loss of income during the pandemic was associated with diet quality and if so, whether this was mediated by distress. Adults in the UK and Australia (N = 957) completed online questionnaires to explore the impact of the first COVID-19 lockdown on their employment, salary, emotional wellbeing (depression, anxiety, stress), and diet quality. Structural equation modelling revealed that emotional distress mediated the association between loss of income and diet quality. As predicted, the greater the loss of income, the greater the distress reported; distress was then associated with a less nutritious diet (more intake of processed foods and less fresh produce). These results provide an insight into the role emotional distress can have on diet quality and highlights one less expected outcome of income loss. To protect against the risk of weight gain during future pandemics, it will be important that efforts are made to reduce the levels of distress experienced.