

'INFODEMIC' ON IMMUNITY BOOSTERS

Relevant for: Security Related Matters | Topic: Role of Media and Social Networking Sites in internal security challenges

What were the most searched and consumed foods during the COVID-19 pandemic in India? Top nutrition scientists in the country say that Indians gorged on Vitamin C-rich fruits, zinc supplements and traditional supplements such as ginger and garlic, while opting to stay away from non-vegetarian food, frozen food and Chinese cuisine.

Scientists studying the search trends in food explain that though the search interest in Ayurvedic *Kadha* (a decoction of spices and herbs) was found to be high, the usage was markedly low.

“Rise in COVID-19 cases had a direct association with the search trends,” said Subba Rao M. Gavaravarapu, scientist and Head, Nutrition Information, Communication and Health Education Division, ICMR-National Institute of Nutrition, who headed the study titled “Impact of ‘infodemic in pandemic’ on food and nutrition related perceptions and practices of Indian internet users”.

Published in *PLoS One*, a peer-reviewed open access scientific journal, the study explained that the uncontrolled spread of (mis)information, news and propaganda related to COVID-19 created an ‘infodemic’ leading to panic and unscientific practices among the masses. Even before the declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic, World Health Organization Director-General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, had mentioned another epidemic — an epidemic of misinformation. It was termed “infodemic”, which literally means superfluity of information.

Social media tips

The study found that most people admitted relying on social media for gathering COVID-19 associated tips for boosting immunity, but those with a history of COVID-19 infection reported relying more on doctors and health professionals for information. “With the largest number of Internet users in the world, India has witnessed a steep rise in the number of people seeking information on social media related to COVID-19. This study aimed to evaluate the trend of COVID-19-associated food and nutrition news search by Indian Internet users between 27th January 2020 and 30th June 2021 and its impact on their perceptions and practices,” Dr. Gavaravarapu said.

“The association between the change in Relative Search Volume (RSV) on Google Trends of 34 popularly searched keywords classified by the researchers under 5 different categories — “Immunity”, “Eating behavior”, “Food safety”, “Food scares and concerns” and “COVID scare” — showed a steep rise in search for immunity boosters, vitamin supplement brands “*ayush kadha* (ayurvedic decoction) during the first wave (April-August 2020),” the study said.

Survey results

An online survey conducted on adult Indian Internet users (n = 572) reported high (71.9%) consumption of Vitamin C-rich fruits as well as Vitamin C (68.2%) and Zinc (61.4%) supplements to boost immunity. Traditional Indian spices such as ginger and garlic were used by 62.9% and 50.9% respondents respectively.

Though ‘*kadha/kashayam*’ and ‘*chawanprash*’ were quite hyped, fewer participants reported having consumed them (28.8% and 57.5% respectively).

Dependence on homeopathy medicines for immunity boosting against COVID-19 was found to be the least (28.1%).

“This study highlights the need for media and health literacy to advocate use of health information cautiously,” Dr. Gavaravarapu said.

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