Checklist could help tackle nutritional issues in SA women before and during pregnancy

A brief, freely available checklist could help tackle nutritional issues in South African women before and during pregnancy: The FIGO Nutrition Checklist

### Scope of the problem

Optimal nutrition in preconception and pregnancy has the potential to improve women's health, their pregnancy outcomes, and to reduce the non-communicable disease risk for their offspring [1]. In South Africa, women face a combined threat of obesity, undernourishment, and food insecurity. For example, more than half of women are estimated to have overweight or obesity [2], while national data (from the 2021 NIDS-CRAM wave 5) indicated that 35% of households reported running out of money for food in the past month [3].

The International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics (FIGO) Nutrition Checklist [4] was developed in 2015, as an easy-to-use, freely available, and cross-culturally applicable tool. The checklist helps to identify nutritional issues before, during, or after pregnancy, facilitating conversations on dietary health between women and their healthcare providers. The use of the checklist had not been assessed in South Africa. Therefore, a study supported by the DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Human Development aimed to:

- i) Evaluate data on at-risk dietary practices yielded by the FIGO Nutrition Checklist amongst women in Soweto before and during pregnancy;
- Evaluate the acceptability, usability, and perceived benefits of the checklist from the perspective of a dietitian and participants; and
- iii) Explore the contextual factors for using the checklist as a tool for dietary advice.

## Methodology

The study drew on both quantitative and qualitative data from the *Bukhali* preconception trial [5], which is part of the Healthy Life Trajectories Initiative in South Africa. Participants (n=387) were 18–28-year-old women with overweight or obesity who attended a dietary counselling session as part of the *Bukhali* intervention, between July 2021 and May 2022. During this session, the FIGO Nutrition Checklist was administered. The checklist allows for the identification of "at-risk dietary practices" (such as not eating 2 or more portions of fruit or vegetables per day), using six "yes or no" dietary quality questions. Qualitative data was collected using individual in-depth interviews with the dietitian and a subgroup of 15 participants.

# **Key findings**

The study found that 97.4% (n=377) of participants had at least one at-risk dietary practice. Additionally, a majority of

participants did not meet recommendations around food groups important for maternal health, including fruit and vegetable, fish, dairy, and wholegrain consumption. The odds of being food insecure were 1.87 times higher in women with a high-risk diet (3 or more at-risk dietary practices).



The dietitian and the participants found the FIGO Nutrition Checklist to be largely acceptable and easy to use when integrated into the dietary counselling session. The dietitian noted that some adaptations were required for use in a South African setting, such as translation and explanation of food groups. According to participants, the checklist helped to provide personalised advice and increased participant awareness of their own dietary intake.

	DIETITIAN	PARTICIPANTS
Acceptability	"I absolutely love it [the FIGO Nutrition checklist] you get a bigger picture with more variety of what the participants eat." "It is nice and short."	"I feel that when I speak up, I will get help, like I did. So, it was easy and she made it easy also, because she was not judgmental you know." (ID1 13)
Usability and adaptations	"Apart from the dairy and the others, and obviously the whole grains, everything else is quite straight forward for the participants."	"The questions were straight and simple." (IDI 4) "It was okay because she asked the questions in a way that she made sure that I understood them." (IDI 2)
Perceived benefits	"It allows that bit of engagement to actually go into, do you know why I asked you all these questions about all these different food items, do you realize that every single one of these foods are in your diet for a healthy lifestyle."	"When she asked me that, I get a picture of what do I really eat? And is that good or is that bad?" (IDI 13)



### References

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The study identified a number of factors that may impact the use of the checklist as a tool for behaviour change advice in this urban South African context, including food insecurity, limited diet-related health literacy, body image ideals, and (lack of) social support.

# **Conclusion and implications**

The high prevalence of at-risk dietary practices in this study emphasises the need for efforts to improve nutrition in South African women of reproductive age. The simplicity and free availability of the FIGO Nutrition Checklist underlie its potential for use across global settings. This potential is further supported by our findings of acceptability, reported benefits, and ease of implementation by a dietitian in a South African setting, both during preconception and pregnancy. However, the use of the checklist across various healthcare and community settings requires further research. It is critical that such research considers contextrelated structural, cultural, and social factors, such as food insecurity.

## Article information:

Evaluating implementation of the FIGO Nutrition Checklist for preconception and pregnancy within the Bukhali trial in Soweto, South Africa

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