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# **Perceptions and Determinants of Healthy Eating in High Performing Male Adolescent Rugby Players**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Emily Grace Stokes  
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## Abstract

**Background:** Rugby is a competitive sport in New Zealand, with the leading team, the All Blacks, ranked first in the world. Since nutrition plays an important role in sports performance, understanding how to facilitate young high-performing rugby players to eat healthy will help to optimise their performance. Research is lacking regarding perceptions and determinants of healthy eating for young rugby players, both in New Zealand and internationally. This study aimed to explore perceptions and determinants of healthy eating for high performing male adolescent rugby players living in New Zealand.

**Methods:** Perceptions and determinants were explored using semi-structural individual interviews. Participants were 20 male high-performing rugby players aged 16 to 18 years. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis of themes.

**Results:** Perceptions of healthy eating included balance and variety, portions according to energy needs and specific foods. Numerous determinants of healthy eating were described including factors related to the general lifestyle of an adolescent, including peers, family and food availability, cost, convenience and taste of food. Sports-specific determinants relating to participants' athletic lifestyles were sports performance, motivation to perform, team culture and the timing, amount and types of food on the gastrointestinal tract. Some determinants were both general and sports-specific including the media, physical appearance and feeling good.

**Conclusion:** High-performing male adolescent rugby players living in New Zealand have a good general understanding of the meaning of a healthy diet. A range of determinants influence the diet of these young rugby players, including general and sports-specific determinants from the macro-level, social and physical environment, as well as individual factors. Further research is required to explore the determinants of healthy eating in high-performing male adolescent rugby players both in New Zealand and internationally.

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## Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
ADI	Athlete Diet Index
AES	Australian Eating Survey
AIS	Australian Institute of Sport
AMDR	Acceptable Macronutrient Distribution Range
CARDIA	Coronary Artery Risk Development in Young Adults study
EAGNZA	Eating and Activity Guidelines for New Zealand Adults
GI tract	Gastrointestinal tract
NZANS	New Zealand Adults Nutrition Survey
SSB	Sugar sweetened beverages
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America