Purpose: Proper nutrition promotes the optimal growth and development of children, and when studying specific ways to promote nutrition for adolescents, the importance level at which adolescents view healthy food choices must first be understood. The purposes of this study were to (1) examine nutritional food choices of youth and adolescents, (2) determine if food choices differ by gender and age, and (3) compare perceived and actual weight status.

Methods: This cross-sectional study used a modified Youth/Adolescent Questionnaire survey, the Youth/Adolescent Food Survey (YAFS), to address the stated purposes for a sample of middle school and high school students who sought pre-participation sports examinations. Items selected for the survey included the type and quantity of fruits, vegetables, sweetened beverages, and calorie dense snack foods typically consumed. Additionally, four questions assessed participants’ perceived weight status. Students in the sample’s school district were predominantly Hispanic, and the majority of the school district’s students were from economically disadvantaged families. For evaluation of the sample’s food choices and weight status, descriptive statistics were performed using SPSS to calculate frequencies, means, and Pearson chi-square analysis.

Findings: The sample comprised of 7 middle school students and 54 high school students (N=61; 35 males and 26 females). A statistically significant difference was found for boys’ reports of consuming certain vegetables, such as green/ red peppers, beans (i.e., string beans, bean/ lentils/ soybeans), celery, and zucchini/ summer squash/ eggplant, as compared to the girls. Girls reported eating higher frequencies of snack cakes/ Twinkies. Statistically significant differences between school age (middle or high school) were found, such as middle school students’ reports of greater consumption of diet soda and raisins; however, the sample for those in middle school is very small for adequate comparisons. Out of the 24 fruits and vegetables on the YAFS, boys reported eating 21 of the fruits and vegetables more frequently than girls. Girls reported eating 12 of the 15 calorie dense snack foods on the YAFS at higher frequencies than boys. Furthermore, high school students reported consuming greater frequencies of 19 out of the 24 fruits and vegetables and 13 out of the 15 calorie dense snack foods on the YAFS. Weight status of the sample was 1.6% underweight (n=1), 55.7% normal weight (n=34), 23.0% overweight (n=14), and 18.0% obese (n=11). The students’ perceptions about their weight status were: 14.8% perceived their weight status as too low (n=9), 68.9% reported their weight was about right (n=42), and 16.4% thought they weighed too much (n=10). Over 40% of the total sample incorrectly perceived their weight status, and the difference between actual and perceived weight status was found to be statistically significant (p=0.023).

Conclusions: Data from questions assessing participants’ weight status revealed that almost half of the sample misperceived their actual weight status. It is crucial for health care professionals to intervene with adolescents’ poor food selections because many adolescents are unaware of their weight status, and those in medicine have opportunities to educate adolescents about well-liked, healthy foods in several different settings.