

## **Preference for Food Categories and Items that are Served as Refreshment during Meetings: A Case Study among Academics in the University of Ruhuna**

S. K. K. Mudalige<sup>1\*</sup>, & A. A. A. S. A. Keerthi<sup>2</sup>

*Non Academic Establishment Division<sup>1</sup>, Corporate Management Division<sup>2</sup>  
University of Ruhuna, Matara, Sri Lanka.*

**\*Corresponding author:** *kumudumuduali@yahoo.com*

### **Abstract**

Refreshments served during meetings contributes to make meetings productive and focused. However, health and nutritional status of the participants may be affected positively or negatively, depending on the nature of the items served. The objective of the present study was to analyze academics' preferences for food categories and items served at meetings. Along with demographic variables, preference for common food categories and items served during the meetings were recorded using a Google form circulated among academics of the University of Ruhuna. The percentages of academics who identified themselves as non-vegetarians and vegetarians were 87% and 8%, respectively. An academic of the University claimed to attend an average of 6.4 physical and 5.7 on-line meetings per month. Thirty eight percent of the physical meetings had been served with refreshments comprising "something to eat and a drink". In 27% of the meetings only a drink had been served. A majority of the respondents (72%) viewed that the decision to serve refreshments during a meeting should depend on circumstance, while 26% of the respondents stated that refreshments need to be served at all meetings. Only 2.7% of the respondents opted not to have refreshments during meetings. Even for a meeting that lasts less than an hour, around 30% of the respondents expected refreshments; at least a plain tea or milk-tea. When meeting lasts for 1-2 hours, almost two thirds of respondents wanted at least a plain tea or milk-tea while another 18% wished to have something to eat + drink. When a meeting duration was of 2-3 hours, more than 60% expected something to eat with a drink. A half of the respondents expected an extra serving when a meeting extends for 4-5 hours. High-salt+carb-rich savory biscuits, high- sugar items such as cakes and biscuits and fried items were not accepted by 37, 34 and 15% of the respondents, respectively. Meanwhile, more than 90% of respondents prefer water, tea or coffee, fruits, backed starchy items and nuts to be served. The most accepted fruit was banana, followed by grapes and apple. Among the dairy food items, yoghurt and cheese topped the list. Among starchy items, sandwich and vegetable rotti topped the list. Cutlet and dhal wadei were the most preferred fried item. Interestingly, 5% of the academics said that they do not consume dairy products.

Eggs, fish, dairy and chicken and dairy products were accepted by as high as 96%, 95, 95% and 83% of academics, respectively. The study showed that the academics, in general, are concerned about their health and make nutritionally-concerned preference for food items that are to be served during meetings. Considering the academics choices and general nutritional guidelines, this paper proposes a few sample menus suitable to be served at meetings of different length durations.

**Keywords:** *Food Choices, Health, Meeting, Refreshment*

## **Introduction**

Attending meetings is an unavoidable job-related responsibility of many senior level administrators. University academics need to attend a wide range of regular academic and administrative meetings scheduled monthly at various levels of the University. In addition to regular-scheduled meetings, numerous other unscheduled meetings also take place at all levels as well. Participation of academic administrators such as Vice Chancellor, Deputy Vice Chancellor, Deans, Heads of the Departments, and Directors of the centers/units at many such meetings is often mandatory. Serving refreshments during meetings is a common practice. Depending on the duration of the meetings, the refreshment menus may range from a simple drink to a one with a number of food items of various categories. Refreshments may be important to keep participants more active and afresh, particularly when meetings run for extended periods. However, high rate of non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and ischemic heart diseases prevail among Sri Lankans (Ediriweera et al., 2018), indicates that health and nutritional aspects of the refreshment menus served at meetings should be considered seriously. If nutritionally-wise menus are selected, meeting refreshments can have positive impacts on the health and nutritional status of the participants. Some Universities, for example, University of Central Arkansas and University of Arizona have implemented Healthy Meeting Guidelines by introducing healthy meeting menus and appropriate physical activities that can be done during meetings. Those guidelines propose that, apart from making attendees healthy, healthy meetings help to deliver the best out of attendance.

In proposing nutritionally-wise meeting refreshment menus, in addition to the nutritional information about the food items, the choices and the views of the meeting attendees should also be considered. The choices and expectations of the academics about the meeting-refreshment-menus have not been studied systematically. In this context, the present study determined the academics' preferences for different food categories and items that are commonly served during meetings, and analyzed the perceptions and attitudes about present meeting refreshment menus. The study suggests a few meeting menus considering nutritional guidelines and academics' preferences.

## **Materials and Methods**

The protocol of this study was approved by the Ethical Review Committee of the University of Ruhuna. A pre-tested structured questionnaire on a Google form was emailed to all (n=569) academics of the University. In determining the number of meetings, the Vice Chancellor, Deputy Vice Chancellor, Deans and Heads of the Departments were not considered. Along with demographic variables, dietary habits (vegetarian or non-vegetarian), acceptance for main categories of foods and refreshment items that are commonly served during the meetings were recorded. The common food items served in meetings were identified from the records maintained by relevant authorities and by interviewing relevant persons who handle meeting meals/refreshments.

Descriptive statistics were performed using IBM SPSS 25.

## **Results and Discussion**

Out of the 569 academics reached via email, only 74 (13%) responded. Among them 53% were male; 22% lecturers; 43% senior lecturers, and 35% professors. The age distribution of respondents was as follows: 55 – 65 years (18%), 45-54 years (42%), 35-44 years and 25-34 years (14%). The percentages of respondents who identified themselves as non-vegetarians and vegetarians were 87% and 8%, respectively. All (n=74) respondents served in at least one committee in the University or Faculty. Around 51% of them claimed serving in 4-6 committees, 8% in 10, 1% in 11 and about 7% in more than 15 committees. Interestingly, 66% of the respondents served as a chairperson or a secretary of at least one committee, and among them 18% were serving in 2 committees. The mean number of physical meetings attended by respondents during a calendar month within the University premises was 6.4, which is higher than that of online meetings (mean is 5.7). The survey revealed that 38% of the physical meetings had been served with refreshments comprised of “something to eat and a drink” while 27% had been served at least a drink. Only 2.7% of the respondents stated that refreshments need not be served during the meetings (Table 1) and, those were non-vegetarian, female, middle-aged (35-44 years) academics. Interestingly, 26% wanted refreshments to be served always during meetings. A majority (72%) responded that the decision should depend on meeting circumstances.

Though 72% preferred not to have any refreshment if meetings last less than an hour, a reasonable percentage of respondents (31%) expected a plain tea or a milk tea. About 65% expects to have at least a drink if meetings lasts for 1-2 hours, while 18% wished to have something to eat as well. Since five faculties of the University are located at geographically distant places, academics need to spend some time for travelling when they attend meetings conducted at the main administration complex. This may partly explain the reasons for expecting some refreshments even at the meetings of shorter durations.

**Table 1.** Preferred Refreshment Types According to the Duration of the Meeting

Duration of meeting (hrs)	Not required	Plain tea only	Milk tea (fresh or powdered)	Some food and a drink	Extra serving of refreshments
	% of respondents				
1>	71.6	21.6	5.4	1.4	-
1-2	18.9	36.5	27.0	17.6	-
2-3	2.7	17.6	9.5	63.6	6.6
3-4	-	4.1	12.2	65.3	17.4
4-5	-	-	2.7	51.4	45.9
6<	-	-	-	24.3	75.7

The table indicates that for meetings lasting 2-3 hours, more than 60% expects a food and a drink. For a meeting which lasts over 6 hours a great majority of the respondents (75%) prefers an extra serving. Thus, it is recommended to inquire meeting attendees regarding an additional serving if a meeting lasts over 4 hours or so.

High-salt and carb rich savory biscuits, high-sugar items such as cakes and biscuits, and fried items were not accepted by 37%, 34% and 15% of the respondents, respectively (Table 2). The survey also indicated that high carb, fried, sugar-rich drink items were not accepted by 15-30% respondents. Considering the adverse health effects among general public along with the non-acceptance of above food categories by a substantial percentage of respondents, the study suggests to remove such unhealthy items from meeting refreshment menus. Meanwhile, more than 90% accepted water, tea or coffee, fruits, baked starchy items, and nut. Dairy drinks were less accepted than cheese and yoghurts.

Interestingly, the most accepted fruit was banana, followed by grapes and apple. Among dairy food items, yoghurt and cheese topped the list. Milk packets, milk-tea and energy drink were not accepted by 17.6%, 18.9%, and 29.7% of the respondents. Among starchy items sandwich and vegetable roti topped the list, closely followed by helapa, cream crackers and fish buns. Cutlet and dhal vadei were the most preferred fried items.

Another consideration that should be made in deciding a meeting menu is animal source food items. However, eggs, fish, dairy and chicken, can safely be included into menus as those items were accepted by over 80% of the respondents. Care should be paid when serving mutton, pork, or beef containing items since over 50% do not consume those food items. Only 5% stated that they do not consume dairy foods.

**Table 2.** Academics' Preference for Different Food Categories and Items

<b>Category</b>	<b>Accept always or sometime</b>	<b>Don't accept</b>
	% of respondents	
Water	100	0.0
Caffeine drinks (tea, coffee, Nescafe, etc.)	98.7	1.4
Fruits	98.6	1.4
Baked starchy items (Sandwich, patty)	98.6	1.4
Nuts	97.3	2.7
Fruit drinks	96	4.1
Traditional items (helapa)	95.9	4.1
Dairy such as yoghurt, cheese	94.6	5.4
Dairy-based drinks	91.8	8.1
Fried items (rolls, cutlets, vadei etc.)	85.0	15.0
High sugar items (cakes, biscuits)	64.0	34.0
High salt + carb Savory biscuits (eg.Crisco)	63.0	37.0
<b>Preferred food items</b>		
Banana	98.7	1.4
Yoghurt	97.3	2.7
Cashew	97.3	2.7
Peanut	95.9	4.1
Sandwich	95.9	4.1
Cheese	94.6	5.4
Cutlet	90.6	9.4
Dhal vadei	90.6	9.4
Grapes	91.9	8.1
Vegetable roti	91.9	8.1
Fruit drink	89.2	10.8
Helapa	89.2	10.8
Cream crackers	87.8	12.2
Fish bun	87.9	12.2
Apple	86.5	13.5
Pol roti	85.2	14.9
Rolls	85.2	14.9
Butter cake	85.1	14.9
Ulundu vadei	83.8	16.2
Plain buns	83.8	16.2
Chocolate cakes	82.5	17.6
Milk packets	82.4	17.6
Samosa	82.4	17.6
Tea with sugar	81.1	18.9
Tea with fresh milk/milk powder with sugar	81.1	18.9
Chocolate biscuits	81.1	18.9
Tea without sugar	78.3	21.6
Savory biscuits	77.1	23.0
Icing/Fruit cakes	71.6	28.4
Energy drink (milo etc)	70.2	29.7

Curtsey, politeness, and apparent hygiene of the caterers were rated by many respondents to be at acceptable levels. Considerations on possible negative health impacts, combination of different food items, and packaging (use of plastics/polythene) were identified as the major concerns that are to be addressed by a reasonable percentage of respondents.

Food Based Dietary Guidelines (2021) recommends consuming foods from six broad categories and to have higher dietary diversity. It was observed that respondents are of nutritionally-wise in terms of their food item preferences/acceptances and avoidances. Avoiding the items that are not consumed by at least 15% of the respondents and considering the recommendations of the Food Based Dietary Guidelines (2021), several menus can be suggested (Table 3).

**Table 3:** Proposed Refreshment Menus for Meetings of Different Durations

Food category	Food item	Meeting duration (hrs)														
		1>				1-4					4<					
		1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	
Cereal Vegetable Fish/egg	Cream crackers	X		X				X						X*		
	Helapa		X				X	X				X			X*	
	Fish bun					X										X
	Sandwich									X	X		X	X		
	Vegetable rotti with egg or fish								X			X				
Pulses Oil	Dahl vadei				X			X								X
	Cutlet					X	X		X	X	X		X	X		
Fruits	Banana	X			X	X					X		X			X
Dairy	Yoghurt						X					X			X	
	Cheese			X				X								
	Milk tea	X	X			X			X		X		X	X	X	
	Plain tea				X		X		X				X*			
Nuts and oil	Peanuts										X*	X*				X*

Note: \*as extra serving

Considering the high cost, peanut or ground nut can be suggested only for meetings that last for a longer duration. On request, attendees may be served with hot beverages such as plain tea or tea with milk. Since respondents' choices regarding plain tea, tea with milk and sugar and tea without sugar are vary; it is advisable to inquire real need of the meeting attendees before preparing those beverages.

## Conclusions

The present study reveals that academics of University of Ruhuna attend a large number of meetings and they are served with refreshments at many occasions. Since academics showed nutritionally-wise choices for food categories and items, meeting organizer can safely follow the general nutritional guidelines in deciding meeting menus. Length of the meeting, the need of providing an additional

serving and packaging materials were among the other aspects that need to be considered in deciding a meeting refreshment menu. The study proposes several possible meeting refreshment menus that are more healthy and acceptable to many attendees.

## References

Ediriweera, D. S., Karunapema, P., Pathmeswaran, A., & Arnold, M. (2018). Increase in premature mortality due to non-communicable diseases in Sri Lanka during the first decade of the twenty-first century. *BMC public health*, 18(1), 1-6.

Food Based Dietary Guidelines. (2021). Nutrition Division, Ministry of Health, Sri Lanka. <http://www.FBDG-Practitioners-Handbook-English-1.pdf>.

Guide to Promoting Healthy Cooperative Extension Educational Meetings & Events. University of Arizona. <https://repository.arizona.edu/bitstream/handle/10150/146472/az1379-2006.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

Healthy Meeting Guide, University of Central Arkansas. <https://uca.edu/bewell/files/2020/01/Healthy-Meetings-Guide.pdf>.