

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Impact of COVID-19 on Dietary Patterns and Nutrition Status of Adolescents Living with HIV in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

COVID-19 disrupted livelihoods, food, and healthcare systems, heightening nutritional vulnerabilities amongst adolescents living with HIV (ALHIV). With schools' closures, adolescents had no access to the school's nutrition programme. Therefore, it is possible that more adolescents experienced episodes of hunger. There is much speculation but little evidence yet to indicate the impact of COVID-19 on the dietary patterns and nutritional status of ALHIV in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe, during that time. This study aimed to examine the impact of COVID-19 on dietary patterns and nutritional status of four groups of adolescents living with HIV in rural and urban areas in Zimbabwe in order to find a practical solution for such circumstances. The study used a mixed-method approach and adopted the triangulation design with a validating quantitative data model. A total of 140 participants were selected from youth-friendly clinics using random purposive sampling. Structured questionnaires, interviews, anthropometric measurements and clinical records were used for data collection. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and correlational statistics, while thematic analysis was used for qualitative data analysis. Being underweight emerged as a significant problem affecting 38 individuals (27.14%), with more adolescents residing in rural areas affected (23; 34.33%). Urban residents were more prone to overnutrition and stunting, with males disproportionately affected by moderate and severe stunting (20.00%; $p < 0.001$). In both settings, having a higher dietary diversity score of ≥ 6 was significantly associated with overnutrition ($p < 0.050$). Participants' views surfaced mainly in relation to food scarcities, varying meal patterns and financial difficulties during the pandemic. However, some participants reported using home gardening as a resilience and adaptive tool. Findings from the study support the idea that COVID-19 highlighted and exacerbated existing vulnerabilities among ALHIV, particularly in terms of dietary patterns and nutritional status, while exposing urban–rural and gender inequalities.

Keywords: Adolescence, COVID-19, HIV, malnutrition, dietary patterns