

Mexico to ban junk food from schools to fight fat

May 27 2010, By MARK STEVENSON , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Mexico is looking to battle the bulging waistlines of its children by banning the sale of junk food in its schools, including many of the traditional treats generations of kids have grown up with.

Getting the ax along with modern soft drinks and sweets will be salted tamarind candy, pork rinds and atole, the thick and sweet cornstarch-based beverage served piping hot in the morning.

The anti-obesity guidelines presented by health and education officials Wednesday make recommendations that at times seem more suited for a Manhattan salad bar than a Mexican school yard.

Tortas - the often overstuffed, greasy, meat-packed sandwiches popular in Mexico - are out, unless they are "light" versions such as beans, avocado and cheese, or chicken-and-vegetables. Only low-fat tacos, burritos and salads will be allowed.

The Health Department says it hopes to have the rules in place when the next school year starts in August. The rules must still be approved by experts and a review committee. The guidelines would cover all 220,000 public and private primary and middle schools serving 25 million students.

President Felipe Calderon launched a nationwide anti-obesity campaign in January, saying the incidence of obesity among youngsters has tripled in Mexico over the last three decades. "Unfortunately, we are the

country with the biggest problem of [childhood obesity](#) in the entire world," he said.

About 4.5 million Mexican children between the ages of 5 and 11 are overweight. About 26 percent of all Mexican children are overweight.

Experts say one reason obesity has accelerated is the invasion of U.S.-style soft drinks and [snack foods](#). While schoolchildren once ate fruit sprinkled with lime and salt, and drank fruit juices, those harder-to-prepare foods are being displaced by prepackaged foods.

The overweight problem is compounded because some of Mexico's population of 107 million have a genetic tendency to develop diabetes.

Mexican schools usually don't have cafeterias. So, for decades, children have swarmed around vendors - school employees, cooperatives or food stand operators - who sell sweets and other goodies on the school grounds.

Under the new guidelines only water, unsweetened but flavored water, or pure [fruit juices](#) will be sold in schools. No [soft drinks](#) or sugary fruit drinks, and only low-fat milk, will be allowed.

Salvador Torres is the head comptroller of the Pascual Cooperative, which produces Mexico's classic school-yard drink, the sugary, fruit-based Boing!

He says he was a bit disconcerted by the new rules.

"Children want sweet stuff," said Torres. "It's the children themselves who are saying: 'I don't like this, it's not Boing!' Kids are not going to stop asking for it."

Health Secretary Jose Angel Cordoba said nationwide consumption of fruits and vegetables has declined 40 percent over the last 10 to 15 years, while consumption of sweetened drinks has risen 40 percent to 50 percent.

Officials held out the possibility that some products could be reformulated to meet the guidelines.

But it remains to see how effective the in-school ban will be. Vendors routinely set up stalls full of soda and junk food just outside school gates.

And anti-obesity programs have also run up against the harsh reality of Mexico's largely under-equipped public schools, very few of which offer students hot meals.

In April, the lower house of Congress approved a law that would require daily exercise for school children who currently get only one physical education class a week. But doubts arose about the measure when critics noted that about three-quarters of Mexican schools don't have a playground or gymnasium in which to exercise.

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