

Should we play hide-and-go-seek with our children's vegetables?

March 1 2012

Pass the peas please! How often do we hear our children say this? According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System survey of adolescents, only 21% of our children eat the recommended 5 or more fruits and vegetables per day. So not very many children are asking their parents to "pass the peas," and parents are resorting to other methods to get their children to eat their vegetables.

One popular method is hiding vegetables. There are even cookbooks devoted to doing this and new [food](#) products promise they contain vegetable servings but don't taste like vegetables! But this "sneaky" technique has been controversial, as some dietitians, doctors, and parents have argued that sneaking vegetables into food does not promote increased [vegetable consumption](#) because children are unaware they are eating vegetables, and are not likely to continue the practice into adulthood. A study in the March/April 2012 issue of the *Journal of [Nutrition Education and Behavior](#)* found that informing children of the presence of vegetables hidden within snack food may or may not alter taste preference. Acceptability of the vegetable-enriched snack food may depend on the frequency of prior exposure to the vegetable.

Chickpea chocolate chip cookies or chocolate chip cookies?

Investigators from Columbia University enrolled 68 elementary and middle school children and asked just that question. In each pair, one sample's label included the food's vegetable (eg, broccoli gingerbread spice cake), and one sample's label did not (eg, gingerbread spice cake).

Participants reported whether the samples tasted the same, or whether they preferred one sample. What the children didn't know was that both samples contained the nutritious vegetable. The investigators found that taste preferences did not differ for the labeled versus the unlabeled sample of zucchini chocolate chip bread or broccoli gingerbread spice cake. However, students preferred the unlabeled cookies (ie, chocolate chip cookies) over the vegetable-labeled version (ie, chickpea chocolate chip cookies). The investigators also assessed the frequency of consumption for the three vegetables involved and chickpeas were consumed less frequently (81% had not tried in past year) as compared to zucchini and broccoli.

Ms. Lizzy Pope, MS, RD, the principal investigator of this study states, "The present findings are somewhat unanticipated in that we were expecting students to prefer all three of the "unlabeled" samples. These findings are consistent with previous literature on neophobia that suggests that children are less apt to like food with which they are unfamiliar. Since the majority of students had had broccoli and zucchini within the past year (as compared to chickpeas), it appears that there must be some familiarity with a vegetable for the labeling of the vegetable content not to influence taste preference. Considering this then, it is not surprising that the unlabeled version of the chickpea chocolate chip cookies was preferred over the labeled version."

Dr. Randi Wolf, PhD, MPH, co-investigator adds, "Food products labeled with health claims may be perceived as tasting different than those without health claims, even though they are not objectively different. I've even read studies that have shown children like baby carrots better when they are presented in McDonald's packaging. These prior studies suggest the potential power that food labels can have on individuals. Although anecdotal reports suggest that children may not eat food products that they know contain vegetables, little is actually known about how children's [taste preferences](#) may be affected when the

vegetable content of a [snack food](#) item is apparent on the item's label. This study is important in that it may contribute knowledge of the potential effectiveness of a novel way to promote vegetable consumption in children."

Based on what the investigators learned from this study, it seems more important to introduce our [children](#) to a variety of [vegetables](#) rather than continually hiding them.

More information: The article is "The Influence of Labeling the Vegetable Content of Snack Food on Children's Taste Preferences: A Pilot Study" by Lizzy Pope, MS, RD and Randi L. Wolf, PhD, MPH. It appears in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, Volume 44, Issue 2 (March/April 2012)

Provided by Elsevier

Citation: Should we play hide-and-go-seek with our children's vegetables? (2012, March 1) retrieved 29 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-03-hide-and-go-seek-children-vegetables.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--