

Parents say that healthy eating is challenging for youth who play sports

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The food and beverages available to youth when they participate in organized sports can often be unhealthy, according to a new study released in the July/August 2012 issue of the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*. The findings were based on interviews with parents of players participating in youth basketball programs. Common food in youth sport settings were sweets (eg, candy, ice cream, doughnuts), pizza, hot dogs, "taco-in-a-bag," salty snacks (eg, chips, cheese puffs, nachos), as well as soda pop and sports drinks. Parents also reported frequent visits to a fast-food restaurant (eg, McDonald's, Dairy Queen) when their children were playing sports. Parents told researchers they considered these to be unhealthy. Parents said their busy schedules getting to practices and games made them rely more on convenient, but less healthy, foods and beverages.

The research was conducted by investigators from the University of Minnesota. They recruited 60 parents of youth [basketball players](#) and conducted eight focus groups. Despite finding that parents considered youth sport an unhealthy [food environment](#), parents were ambivalent about the food and beverage choices available in youth sports, viewing snacks as an occasional treat, and sometimes rationalizing unhealthy eating because they saw their child as healthy. Parents had difficulty determining whether some food and beverage options were healthful. They also expressed concern about whether making [healthful food](#) and beverages more available at youth sport venues, particularly in concession stands, was feasible.

According to Toben F. Nelson, ScD, principal investigator of this study, "The food environment in youth sport exposes kids and their families to many unhealthful foods and beverages and few healthful options. Youth who participate in sports spend considerable time in these activities outside of school, and these sport environments are likely to influence their eating behavior." Lead author, Megan Thomas, MPH, RD, adds, "Parents should be concerned about what their children are eating, because good nutrition has benefits beyond weight management and is important for optimizing performance."

The study also brought to light that despite parent awareness of the poor food and beverage choices that are prevalent in youth sport; few parents attempted to change the situation. "These findings suggest the importance of helping parents understand the benefits of healthful eating for all children, regardless of their current weight status, and of helping parents feel empowered to create a healthful food environment for their children despite time obstacles," says investigator Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, PhD, RD.

Despite the study findings, researchers believe that youth sport is a promising setting for promoting nutrition. According to the National Council of Youth Sports, more than 44 million youth participate in organized sports each year. Studies have shown that youth sports participants are more likely to consume [sports drinks](#) and items from fast-food restaurants than youth who don't participate in sports.

The investigators made recommendations to promote healthful dietary habits in youth sports participants: Integrate nutrition messages into youth sport programs; develop collaboration between youth sport leagues, public health professionals, and dietitians to create positive messages about nutrition that are specific to youth sport and could be delivered by coaches and peer mentors; enlist coaches and older peer mentors to deliver key nutrition messages; develop nutrition guidelines

for sport leagues regarding the types of food and beverages that are appropriate for organized snack schedules and concession stands; and explore feasible ways to improve the nutritional quality of food and beverages available and sold in youth sport settings.

More information: “Exploring Parent Perceptions of the Food Environment in Youth Sport” by Megan Thomas, MPH, RD; Toben F. Nelson, ScD; Eileen Harwood, PhD; and Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, PhD, RD. It appears in *The Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, Volume 44, Issue 4 (July/August 2012)

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