

# Low income kids eat more fruits and vegetables when they are in school

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The fruits and vegetables provided at school deliver an important dietary boost to low income adolescents, according to Meghan Longacre, PhD and Madeline Dalton, PhD of Dartmouth Hitchcock's Norris Cotton Cancer Center and The Hood Center for Children and Families. In a study released in *Preventive Medicine*, Longacre and Dalton found that fruit and vegetable intake was higher among low income adolescents on days when they consumed meals at school compared to days when low income adolescent were not in school. The opposite was true for high income adolescents who consumed fewer fruits and vegetables when school was in session, compared to summer months. While in school, all students consumed fruits and vegetables with similar frequency regardless of income level.

According to Longacre, "Innovation in [school food](#) offerings for kids has emphasized increased consumption of fruits and vegetables and it's working for low [income](#) kids, but the evidence shows that a different strategy may be needed to have the same positive effect on high income kids."

The Dartmouth research team, led by Dalton and Longacre, surveyed 1,885 NH and VT [middle school students](#) and their parents by phone. Using a unique longitudinal study design, they created a type of "natural experiment" by randomly allocating participants to be surveyed at different times of the year. This created comparable groups of adolescents who were, or were not, being exposed to [school](#) food by virtue of when they were surveyed. This facilitated comparison of fruit

and vegetable consumption during the school months and over the summer. The survey asked the adolescents to recall [fruit](#) and vegetable consumption in the previous seven days. And no, fries don't count.

Previous studies demonstrated that kids from low income households eat fruits and vegetables less often than their high income peers, but whether school food mitigates the situation was an open question. By comparing consumption in and out of school by income group, Longacre and Dalton provide key data to inform national policy about resource allocation for meals in schools.

According to Dalton, "This study confirms that the national and regional school food programs provide an important source of [fruits and vegetables](#) for low income adolescents, which we know is a key indicator of dietary quality." Longacre adds, "Schools clearly have a role in providing healthy foods to children. Our data suggest that the most vulnerable students are benefitting the most from school food."

**More information:** *Preventive Medicine*,  
[www.sciencedirect.com/science/ ... ii/S0091743514003727](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../ii/S0091743514003727)

Provided by The Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth

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