

Healthier school meals offered across US, feds find

August 27 2015



Students get more fruits and veggies, less salt.

(HealthDay)—Most U.S. schools are offering healthier meals that feature more fruits and vegetables, more whole grains and less salt, a new government study reports.

"School meals are healthier now than ever before. We've made real progress, but there is much more to do to help American children make food choices that will keep them healthy throughout their lives," U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Dr. Tom Frieden said in an agency news release.

Since students consume nearly half of their daily calories at school, [school meals](#) are an important source of nutrition for kids, the agency noted.

CDC researchers looked at 14 years' worth of data to see if schools are

implementing U.S. Department of Agriculture nutrition standards issued in 2012. The investigators found a significant increase in the number of schools providing healthy meals.

For instance, in 2014, well over 90 percent of schools offered whole grains each day for breakfast and lunch. Two or more vegetables were offered at 79 percent of schools, up from about 62 percent in 2000. And schools offering two or more fruits rose from about 68 percent in 2000 to 78 percent in 2014.

More than 30 percent of schools offered self-serve salad bars, and 54 percent of schools that prepared their meals in-house used fresh or frozen vegetables instead of canned vegetables. Schools that used low-sodium canned vegetables instead of regular canned vegetables increased from about 10 percent in 2000 to nearly 52 percent in 2014.

Also, nearly two-thirds of schools are using seasonings instead of salt compared to 33 percent in 2000. And the percentage of schools that use low-salt recipes or reduced the amount of salt in recipes doubled between 2000 and 2014.

The study was published Aug. 27 in the CDC's *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*.

"We are encouraged that more schools are offering a variety of fruits and [vegetables](#), and finding ways to reduce the sodium content of school meals," lead author Caitlin Merlo, a health scientist in CDC's School Health Branch, said in the news release.

Salt is sodium chloride. Too much of it causes your body to retain water, which puts an extra burden on the heart and blood vessels, the American Heart Association says.

"Schools play a critical role in demonstrating and reinforcing healthy eating behaviors by making sure that nutritious and appealing foods and beverages are available and promoted to students," Merlo explained. "This is particularly important because children's eating patterns carry into adulthood."

Despite the encouraging findings in this study, much more can be done to get students to eat more [fruits and vegetables](#), and to reduce the amount of salt in [school](#) foods, the researchers said.

Childhood obesity —the result of poor eating habits and inactivity—has more than doubled in children and quadrupled in adolescents in the past 30 years, according to the CDC.

More information: The American Academy of Pediatrics has more about [child nutrition](#).

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Citation: Healthier school meals offered across US, feds find (2015, August 27) retrieved 20 March 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-08-healthier-school-meals-feds.html>

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