

More healthy foods offered in school lunches, study finds

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(HealthDay)—American kids are getting more healthy food choices in

school lunches, a new study finds.

Elementary [school](#) cafeterias are offering more vegetables, fresh fruit, salad bars, whole grains and more healthy pizzas, while the availability of high-fat milks, fried potatoes and regular pizza has decreased, researchers report.

"School food service programs have worked hard to improve the nutritional quality of [school lunches](#), and largely have been very successful," said lead researcher Lindsey Turner, director of the Initiative for Healthy Schools at Boise State University, in Idaho.

However, more work is needed to make sure that children in every part of the country regularly have the same healthy choices in the lunch line, she said.

The report was published March 17 in the journal *Preventing Chronic Disease*.

In the study of more than 4,600 elementary schools that are part of the U.S. National School Lunch Program, researchers found that school lunches improved significantly between 2006-2007 and 2013-2014.

Despite improvements in [food choices](#), disparities were still found. For example, schools in the West were more likely to offer salad bars than schools in the Northeast, Midwest or South, the researchers found.

In addition, schools with a majority of black or Hispanic kids were less likely to offer fresh fruit than schools with mostly white children, they added.

And schools in poor areas were also less likely to offer salads regularly, compared with schools in middle- or high-income neighborhoods,

Turner and colleagues found.

Over the course of the study, Midwestern schools slightly reduced offering pre-made salads in favor of salad bars, but Southern schools were more likely to offer pre-made salads and less likely to have salad bars, the researchers found.

However, just because more [healthy food choices](#) are available doesn't mean kids are choosing them, one recent study suggested. In fact, University of Vermont researchers found that more fruits and vegetables ended up in the garbage after the U.S. government introduced a rule requiring fruits and vegetables to be included with school lunches.

One expert said that offering healthier foods is only part of the answer to getting kids to eat better, and that changing eating habits requires time and effort.

"It is not only important to improve the quality of school lunches but to make these foods attractive, tasty, easily seen and accessible," said Samantha Heller, a senior clinical nutritionist at New York University Medical Center, in New York City.

Studies have found that putting fresh fruit in a nice bowl, in a conveniently located, well-lit area in the school cafeteria increased sales of fruit by 102 percent, she noted.

"A brightly lit, hot-and-cold salad bar filled with colorful fresh fruits, vegetables, beans and nuts, mushroom and spinach pizza, and veggie tacos center-stage in the lunchroom would be very attractive to students and staff alike," Heller said.

This approach works well at home, too, she added.

"Kids are more likely to grab healthy foods like cut-up melon, carrots, peppers, edamame and hummus when they are upfront and easy to grab in the fridge," Heller said.

More information: Visit the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) for more on kids and healthy eating.

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