

Kids' eating habits highlight need for healthier lunchboxes

May 3 2016, by David Ellis

New research from the University of Adelaide shows children aged 9-10 years old are receiving almost half of their daily energy requirements from "discretionary" or junk foods.

The study evaluated the core food intake of more than 430 South Australian [children](#) aged 9-10. The results – published recently in the *Journal of Human Nutrition and Dietetics* – show that 45 percent of the children's daily energy intake was sourced from discretionary foods high in fat, salt and sugar.

"We found that children obtained over half of their daily energy from carbohydrates and about one-third of their energy from fats, half of which was saturated fat," says lead author Dr Melissa Whitrow from the University of Adelaide's School of Population Health and the Robinson Research Institute.

"We know that an unhealthy diet is a key contributor to obesity and also paves the way for other health problems in later life, such as poor cardiovascular health. The establishment and maintenance of [healthy eating habits](#) during the transition from childhood to adolescence is also very important."

The study uncovered a number of issues, such as:

- Boys and girls consumed an average of 156 grams and 161 grams of total sugar per day respectively;

- 91 percent of children had fewer than the recommended daily servings of vegetables;
- 99.8 percent of children had fewer than the recommended daily servings of non-processed meat or protein alternatives (such as eggs, nuts, beans, chickpeas or lentils);
- 83 percent of boys and 78 percent of girls consumed more than the recommended daily intake of salt;
- Fibre intake was inadequate in 41 percent of boys and 24 percent of girls;
- Dairy intake was inadequate in 83 percent of girls.

"At this stage in their lives, girls need to eat more dairy as they head towards puberty, as this is important for their bone density," Dr Whitrow says.

"Variety of food is also an issue. Red meat tended to be the dominant meat, whereas fish should be consumed in a healthy diet at least weekly. It's important for families to understand that processed meat is a discretionary food, not a core food, and is often high in salt and fat."

Dr Whitrow says socio-economic status made little difference to the dietary problems highlighted in the study.

"Based on the results of our study, there is much to be done to encourage 9-to-10-year-old children and their families to make healthier food choices. For example, substituting at least one high-fat, high-sugar or high-salt food item with a healthier [food](#) choice in the school lunchbox each day might make a difference," she says.

"This isn't about blaming the parents. As a community we need to help parents more. We need to look at what's being advertised to their children, and how we can encourage children to try different foods. Providing healthy alternatives into a lunchbox and more vegetables at the

dinner table would be a good start."

More information: M. J. Whitrow et al. Core food intakes of Australian children aged 9-10 years: nutrients, daily servings and diet quality in a community cross-sectional sample, *Journal of Human Nutrition and Dietetics* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/jhn.12358](https://doi.org/10.1111/jhn.12358)

Provided by University of Adelaide

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