

Kids eat more fruits, vegetables when schools offer salad bar

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Students at Allesandro Elementary enjoy the benefits of a fruit and veggie bar everyday. Credit: LAUSD

A new UCLA study has found that elementary schools can significantly increase the frequency of fruit and vegetable consumption among low-income students by providing a lunch salad bar.

The findings, published in the December issue of the international peer-reviewed journal *Public Health Nutrition*, show that the frequency of students' fruit and vegetable consumption increased significantly — from 2.97 to 4.09 times daily — after a salad bar was introduced. In addition, students' mean daily intake of energy, cholesterol, saturated fat and total fat declined considerably.

"One of the major contributing factors to the high rate of overweight children in the United States is that they do not consume the daily recommended servings of fruits and vegetables," said lead author Dr. Wendy Slusser, assistant professor of pediatrics at Mattel Children's Hospital UCLA and the UCLA School of Public Health. "Increasing the availability and accessibility to healthy foods is one way to improve children's diets. In turn, this sets up opportunities for kids to have repeated exposure to healthy food and positively impact their choices."

The UCLA pilot study was conducted at three Los Angeles Unified School District elementary schools participating in the salad bar program and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's reimbursable lunch program. Study participants included 337 children in grades 2 through 5. Children were interviewed using a 24-hour food-recall questionnaire, both before and after the salad bar intervention — in 1998 and 2000, respectively.

The study was offered in conjunction with a nutritional education component, including a school assembly to teach children about the proper etiquette of serving themselves salad and picking a well-balanced lunch, as well as an artwork project and visits to farmers markets or a farm. The salad bar program was developed together by LAUSD Food Services and Occidental College in Los Angeles.

"The results are clear — if we provide fresh fruits and vegetables in kid-friendly ways, we will increase consumption," said school board member Marlene Canter. "I am excited to see that our efforts to find new and creative ways to improve our students' nutrition and help reduce obesity are working."

Since the study, the LAUSD school board voted positively on a 2003 obesity-prevention motion that includes recommending fruit and vegetable bars as a modification of the hot lunch program.

An important source of nutrition, fruits and vegetables help with weight management and can also be beneficial in reducing the risk of certain cancers, heart disease, stroke and Type 2 diabetes. Eating a variety of fruits and vegetables can improve health by increasing amounts of vitamin C, phytonutrients, potassium and fiber in the body and displacing energy-dense fatty foods.

The U.S.D.A. has reported that only 36.4 percent of U.S. children between the ages of 2 and 19 eat the

recommended three to five servings of vegetables per day, and only 26 percent eat the two to four recommended daily servings of fruit.

"The salad bar program showed us that children will indeed eat more fruits and vegetables if offered in an appetizing and accessible manner," Slusser said. "Future studies should evaluate parent education with school lunch menu changes, as well as why boys are less likely to eat from the salad bar at lunch than girls."

Source: University of California - Los Angeles

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