

Students cope well with healthier snacks

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Students do not mind buying healthier snacks from vending machines, according to research published in the *International Journal of Food Safety, Nutrition and Public Health*. The findings could have implications for campus health initiatives as well as vendor profits.

The common stereotype of the busy student is of someone who will grab a junk food snack between lectures and rarely chooses a decent, hot meal over a chance to share a beer or two with fellow students. If the stereotype is an obvious generalization, one point remains true, snacks from [vending machines](#) on campus are popular. Now, Julia Lapp, William Harris Ressler and Amy Frith of Ithaca College have carried out an experiment on two campus vending machines in which they swapped out "unhealthy", high sugar, salt and fat snacks for healthier options and then surveyed 200 students on their satisfaction and perceptions regarding the snacking options. No promotions or incentives were used to entice students to purchase the healthier options and the foods sold were not labeled as healthier.

The researchers point out that the environment and context in which consumers make dietary choices is important regarding perception of the foods being sold and the nutrition and related health risks. Moreover, vending machines snacks available on the premises of educational establishments and in the workplace have been the object of scrutiny and criticism by [public health](#) experts, with a particular concern regarding the high levels of sugar, salt, fat and overall calorie content of the foods.

The team's study compared [college students'](#) perceptions and self-reported behavior regarding the food in vending machines before (pre-test) and after (post-test) replacing a portion of the conventional food items with [healthier foods](#), defined as having fewer calories (less than 400 kcal for snacks and cereals less than 150 kcal for candies), limited added sugar (less than 5 grams), lower fat (less than 3 g per serving), healthier fats,

no trans fats, no artificial colors or flavors, and lower sodium (less than 140 milligrams per serving).

The key finding was that sales from the vending machines did not decline when healthier options were added. Moreover, students made aware of the healthier options were quite happy to have purchased those options and the more athletic among them felt it was a positive change. "Results offer insights for promoting [healthier choices](#) and suggest that improving the healthiness of vending machine selections can serve all stakeholders: consumers, companies, and institutions," the team reports.

The team's findings suggest that there are significant benefits to students in offering healthier snack options without compromising convenience or taste. For the educational institution or workplace, a healthier food offering boosts their social responsibility and supports institutional image as well as improving student or staff wellbeing. And, for the vending machine companies, healthier and more options translates into increased sales. "Results of our study suggest that introducing healthier choices to vending machines can indeed be a win-win-win proposition," the team concludes.

More information: Lapp, J.L., Ressler, W.H. and Frith, A.L. (2014) 'College students, vending machines, and improving nutritional choices: the effects of adding healthier foods on perceptions of vending machines', *Int. J. Food Safety, Nutrition and Public Health*, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp.16-33.

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