

School Lunches Healthier than Homemade Lunches, Study Suggests

Meals offered by the National School Lunch Program appear to be healthier than those packed at home, a study of 2nd graders showed.

On average, school lunches were more likely to contain fruits, vegetables, and dairy, whereas those brought from home were more likely to contain snacks high in sugar or fat and non-100 percent fruit juice, according to Jennette Palcic Moreno, PhD, of the Children's Nutrition Research Center in Houston.

Presenting her findings at the Obesity Society meeting, she said she and her colleagues thought the opposite would be true, according to MedPage Today.

“It's interesting because many parents may pack a child's lunch in order to provide a healthier option, but we actually found that when the kids were choosing their lunch from the lunch line, they were more likely to have some of those foods like fruits and vegetables that we're hoping that kids include in their diet,” Moreno said. “Possibly something needs to be done in terms of interventions in order to improve the nutritious value of the lunches that are brought from home.”

The national lunch program has been the target of criticism in the current era of rising childhood obesity rates, Moreno said, although revisions have been made to increase access to fresh fruits, vegetables, and low-fat dairy products. But a large percentage of children bring their lunch from home, and little is known about the quality of the meals.

To compare the quality of school lunches with those packed at home, Moreno and her colleagues conducted a study among 2nd graders at seven schools in the Fort Bend Independent School District near Houston.

The district serves an ethnically diverse student population—28 percent white, 23 percent black, 23 percent Hispanic, and 25 percent Asian. Moreno did not have information on the socioeconomic status of the students.

On three randomly selected days during the school year, the researchers analyzed the contents of 2,107 lunches, of which 38.5 percent were brought from home. The children who opted for the school lunch could choose any

of the foods and drinks from the lunch line. None of the children had access to other sources of food on school grounds.

Compared with the school lunch, those packed at home were significantly less likely to include the following foods:

- **Fruits:** 45.3 percent versus 75.9 percent
- **Vegetables:** 13.2 percent versus 29.1 percent
- **Dairy:** 41.8 percent versus 70 percent

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