

School nutrition improves, but new focus centers on snacks, meals brought from home

by **Lori O'Keefe** • Correspondent

Since the Academy and others recommended replacing sweetened beverages in schools with healthier options in 2004, schools have made tremendous strides in improving school meals and nutrition policies. However, the nutritional quality of foods brought to school by students, parents and staff remains an issue, according to a new AAP policy statement *Snacks, Sweetened Beverages, Added Sugars and Schools* (*Pediatrics*. 2015;135:575-583; bit.ly/1yR0Npf).



Pediatricians can serve as a resource, providing guidance on incorporating a variety of nutrient-rich foods into the diet, according to the policy.

Students obtain food and beverages in schools from three venues: federally sponsored meals sold by schools; products sold in vending machines, school stores and a la carte lines that compete with school meals; and items brought to school in packed lunches and snacks or for events, such as fundraisers, class parties and sporting activities.

"In 2004, our concern was over contracts between industry and schools that incentivized soft drink consumption among students,"



Dr. Murray

said Robert Murray, M.D., FAAP, lead author of the policy statement. "Since then, two of the three venues in which beverages and foods are made available in schools have new national standards that limit access, amounts and types of items sold, whether sold as school meals or vended on campus."

As of June 2014, 92% of school districts nationwide reported meeting U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) school meal standards released in 2012. Those standards increased the availability of fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, whole grains and lower-fat milk; reduced calories, sodium, and saturated and trans fats; and provided age-appropriate serving sizes. In addition, Smart Snacks in School implemented last year requires schools to follow USDA guidelines for foods and beverages sold on campus during the school day.

The third venue – food and beverages brought to school – needs to be the focus now, said Dr. Murray. This venue is unregulated and represents a significant challenge to improving nutrition in schools.

New challenge, new approach

Food brought from home often is higher in calories and lower in nutrition, according to the policy statement, which also recommends that pediatricians take a positive, practical approach



Food and beverages brought to school by students often are higher in calories and lower in nutrition, according to a new AAP policy. Pediatricians should educate families on serving nutrient-rich foods while noting that a small amount of discretionary calories is OK.

when talking with patients and families about good nutrition.

The overall emphasis should be on dietary pattern – encouraging a broad array of foods and looking at diet as a whole. This is a healthier strategy than forbidding "bad" foods, the policy notes. In fact, restricting foods, like withholding sweets, can make them more attractive, while stringent removal of flavorings and fats can render even highly nutritious foods so unpalatable families won't eat them.



Dr. Corkins

"Instead of thinking about what needs to be eliminated from our diet, we need to think about what to incorporate into our diet," said Mark R. Corkins, M.D., FAAP, a member of the AAP Committee on Nutrition.

The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics has long espoused that all foods fit into a balanced, nutrient-rich diet. Added sugars and fats should be consumed in moderation after foods are eaten from the main food groups. Adding a small amount of empty calories to nutrient-



Dr. Bhatia

rich foods and diets may make them more palatable and may encourage consumption and acceptance among children, said Jatinder J.S. Bhatia, M.D., FAAP, a lead author of the policy statement.

The policy presents a five-step approach: select a mix from the five food groups, as recommended by the 2010 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*; offer a variety of new food experiences; serve fewer highly processed items; use small amounts of sugar, salt, fats and oils linked with highly nutritious foods to enhance enjoyment; and offer appropriate portions.

For many children, the lunch served by the school may be their healthiest meal of the day. According to the policy statement, children who consistently ate school meals had better nutrition than children who brought food or ate food from competitive sources.

Budgetary concerns

Potential budget cuts could hurt school food programs. Reimbursement for school meals has not kept up with rising expenses or inflation over the past 20 years. The 2010 Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act increased reimbursement by only 6 cents per meal. It is estimated that reimbursement rates cover less than half the costs to implement the new nutrition standards. Budget cuts also could increase school meal prices, resulting in more students bringing food from home or skipping meals altogether, according to the policy statement.

“We already have food insecurity, but if money for school meals keeps getting cut, we will end up with food poverty, as well,” Dr. Bhatia said.

Recommendations

While nutrition should be discussed at well-child visits, pediatricians also should become familiar with nutrition experts

in the community in case a family needs guidance that requires more time than a pediatrician can give, Dr. Murray said.

The policy statement recommends pediatricians do the following:

- Educate students, parents and school officials about nutrition goals, the 2010 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* and school nutrition guidelines to maximize nutrient density within recommended calorie ranges, allowing a limited amount of discretionary calories to encourage greater consumption of nutrient-rich foods and beverages.
- Acknowledge school meal improvements made by local school nutrition staff and encourage them to fully implement the new USDA guidelines for school meals and competitive items.
- Counsel families and local school staff about healthy food and drink options that can be brought to school for lunches, snacks, fundraisers, sporting events and celebrations.
- Work with school wellness councils to develop nutrition policies.
- Support USDA efforts when advocating within state chapters and school districts to improve school nutrition.

RESOURCES

- School Meals: Child Nutrition Programs, U.S. Department of Agriculture/ Food and Nutrition Service, 1.usa.gov/1F5W9EL
- AAP Committee on Nutrition, bit.ly/1u8M3lv
- 2010 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, 1.usa.gov/1EGdSoZ

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