

news release

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For more information, contact:

Chris Clayton
609-627-5937
media@rwjf.org

State Laws Aimed at Improving School Meals Help Teens Eat More Fruits and Vegetables, New Study Finds

Teens with limited access to healthy foods at home consumed more fruits and vegetables when states required schools to offer them at lunch

Princeton, N.J. – Teens in states that required schools to offer fruits and vegetables as part of the meal program consumed more fruits and vegetables than those living in states with no such policies, according to a study published today in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. The difference was most pronounced among teens who regularly ate school meals and had only unhealthy snacks, such as cookies, chips, and cake, available at home. This study is one of the first to suggest that school-based policies can help mitigate barriers to healthy eating that some teenagers face at home.

To conduct the study, researchers compared students in California and Mississippi, where state law requires high schools to provide a minimum serving of fruits and vegetables in school meals, with students in 25 other states that did not have such standards. When researchers looked specifically at teens who regularly consumed school meals and had only unhealthy snacks at home, they found that those living in California and Mississippi ate 0.45 more cups of fruit and 0.61 more cups of vegetables on average per day than did students in the other states.

“This study suggests that schools can help level the playing field for families who can’t afford or don’t have access to healthy foods,” said Daniel Taber, PhD, a researcher at the University of Illinois at Chicago and lead author of the study. “We found that strong laws—those that give specific requirements for improving school meals—have the potential to help teens eat more fruits and vegetables, especially when they’re not getting those foods at home.” Taber is a co-investigator with Bridging the Gap, a research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), which funded the study.

The authors also found that teens ate more fruits and vegetables when such foods were available at home. Specifically, teens who never had access to fruits or vegetables at home consumed about 0.98 cups of fruits and vegetables per day, while those who always had access consumed about 2.83 cups per day.

The study revealed other less encouraging trends:

- Overall, teens were not eating enough fruits or vegetables to meet recommendations of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. This was true among all the students in the study—on average teens consumed 1.2 cups of fruit and 0.9 cups of vegetables per day.
- The presence of unhealthy snacks at home influenced teens’ intake of fruits and vegetables. Students who always had access to unhealthy snacks at home consumed 1.15 cups of fruit and 0.74 cups of vegetables per day, while students who never had access to unhealthy snacks consumed 1.5 cups of fruit and 1.34 cups of vegetables per day.
- Across the entire study sample, consumption of fruits and vegetables was lowest among Black and Hispanic teens.

The researchers examined state laws and students’ dietary intake in spring 2010, about two years before new school meal standards issued by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) went into effect. Starting in fall 2012, schools participating in the National School Lunch Program were required to provide daily servings of fruits and vegetables in school meals. The new meal standards are part of a larger effort to improve the quality of foods in schools nationwide. In February 2013, USDA issued a [proposed rule for school snacks and drinks](#). That rule is open for public comment until April 9 and once in effect, it will set nutrition standards for the foods and beverages school sell outside of meals, in vending machines, à la carte lines, and other locations.

“These findings confirm that the new school meal standards are a step in the right direction and show us how critically important it is for schools to offer healthy foods,” said C. Tracy Orleans, PhD, senior scientist at RWJF. “What we need now is a strong national standard for school snacks and drinks, because what’s sold outside of the lunch line shouldn’t undermine the progress that schools are making to offer better meals.”

The study, “State Laws Governing School Meals and Disparities in Fruit and Vegetable Intake,” analyzed dietary intake among 9,574 students in grades 9–12 using data from the National Youth Physical Activity and Nutrition Study that was collected in spring 2010.

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About Bridging the Gap

Bridging the Gap is a nationally recognized research program dedicated to improving the understanding of how policies and environmental factors influence diet, physical activity and obesity among youth, as well as youth tobacco use. For more information, visit www.bridgingthegapresearch.org. **Follow Bridging the Gap on Twitter** www.twitter.com/BTGresearch.

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