

The Diets of America's Children: Influence of Dining Out, Household Characteristics, and Nutrition Knowledge. By Biing-Hwan Lin, Food and Consumer Economics Division, Economic Research Service, USDA; Joanne Guthrie, Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion, USDA; and James R. Blaylock, Food and Consumer Economics Division, Economic Research Service, USDA. Agricultural Economic Report No. 746.

Abstract

Recent USDA surveys point out several shortcomings in children's diets. The share of calories from total and saturated fat averaged 4 and 3 percentage points above the recommendations. The sodium intake averaged 23 percent above the 2,400 milligrams recommended by some authorities. These dietary problems start early in childhood and continue into adulthood. Additionally, only a small fraction of female adolescents met the recommended intakes for calcium, fiber, and iron. Compared with home foods, away-from-home foods were higher in total and saturated fat and lower in cholesterol, fiber, calcium, iron, and sodium. With increasing popularity in dining out, efforts to improve children's diets may need strengthening.

Keywords: Children's diets, food away from home, diet and health knowledge, household characteristics.

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Contents

Summary	iii
Introduction	1
Data	2
Meal and Snack Eating Patterns	7
Food Away From Home	8
Food Energy Intakes	9
Fat Intake	13
Cholesterol Intake	16
Sodium Intake	17
Fiber Intake	18
Iron Intake	18
Calcium Intake	19
Weekday and Weekend	21
Household Characteristics	21
Diet and Health Knowledge of Meal Planners	30
Conclusions	32
References	32
Appendix Tables	34

Summary

Food away from home has a higher ratio of fat to calories and lower fiber and calcium than food prepared at home, a fact that may particularly affect female teens, who consume a larger proportion of food away from home than do other children. This report uses data from USDA's 1989-91 Continuing Survey of Food Intakes by Individuals and the Diet and Health Knowledge Survey to examine various aspects of children's diets.

The report's major findings are:

- Children's diets were high in total fat, saturated fat, and sodium and low in food energy and fiber. The share of calories from total fat and saturated fat was fairly consistent among children across age and gender, averaging 34 percent for total fat and 13 percent for saturated fat, which are 4 and 3 percentage points above the recommended levels. Children consumed an average of 2,948 milligrams of sodium per day (excluding salt added at the table), which is 23 percent above the 2,400 milligrams recommended by some health authorities.
- Female adolescents' diets were high in total fat, saturated fat, and sodium. In addition, only a small fraction of female adolescents met the recommended intakes for calcium, dietary fiber, and iron. Low calcium intakes may have serious long-term consequences. The National Academy of Sciences recommends a relatively high allowance of calcium for teenage girls—1,200 milligrams per day—because bone mass develops primarily during the teenage and young adult period.
- The shortcomings in the female adolescents' diets may be related to their eating patterns. Compared with other children, female teens had the highest tendency to skip morning meals (high in iron and calcium), ate the smallest number of meals and snacks, had the largest proportion of meals and snacks away from home (low in fiber, iron, and calcium), and drank the least fluid milk.
- Compared with home foods, higher levels of total fat and saturated fat and lower levels of cholesterol, dietary fiber, calcium, iron, and sodium were found in away-from-home foods eaten by children.
- During the 1989-91 period, foods prepared at schools were higher in fat, fiber, and calcium and lower in cholesterol, iron, and sodium when compared with home foods. Similar results were obtained in a 1993 USDA-sponsored assessment of the nutrient quality of school meals. Consequently, USDA began working on an initiative to improve school meals in 1993. To show support for USDA, the Congress passed the Healthy Meals for Healthy Americans Act of 1994 (Public Law 103-448) requiring that meals served under the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program meet the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* by July 1, 1996. In June 1994, USDA launched the School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children, a comprehensive approach to turning Congress' mandate into a successful program. The Initiative includes both actions to support State and local food service organizations in improving school meals and a broad-based nutrition promotion program to increase the popularity of school meals and encourage children to improve their overall diets.

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ERS has previously estimated that the United States accrues \$250 billion in medical costs and lost productivity as a result of seven health conditions linked to dietary behavior. Some people believe that nutritional guidance should start early in life for the greatest long-term health benefits. Understanding children's dietary patterns can help to identify necessary dietary modifications and hence aid in developing effective messages for improved diets.

Dining out has been increasing for young and old alike, raising questions about nutrient intake, particularly for children. Do children's intakes of food calories, total fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, fiber, calcium, iron, and sodium vary by eating occasion (meals and snacks) and by whether the foods were prepared at home or away from home? Does the source of food away from home (fast food outlets, schools, and restaurants) influence the nutritional content of meals? These two issues are examined in this study. The report compiles children's nutrient intakes according to their social, economic, and demographic characteristics as well as their meal planners' knowledge about diet and health issues. The report also presents the average values of nutrient consumption and related variables for children by age and gender and by food sources.