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Junk Food in Schools: Should It Be Banned?

What is junk food? Most people say it is food that is low in nutrients and high in calories. Candy, chips, and soda are examples. Most of the calories in junk food come from sugar, salt, and fat. Junk food is usually low in cost and ready to eat. TV ads make it look great. But they don't say junk food can be bad for you.

Nutrients are things in food, like vitamins and protein, that help your body grow and stay healthy. Children and adults need lots of different kinds of nutrients every day. Junk food has nutrients too. But it also has things that people do not need to grow, like food coloring and chemicals.

Junk food can be found almost everywhere, even in schools, where students in all grades eat it for snacks or for lunch. Some schools ask students to sell candy or snacks to raise money for sports or field trips.

Today, people wonder if junk food belongs in schools. They say students eat too much junk food. Many schools in the United States and around the world have limited or banned junk food. Read to learn more about why people are concerned about junk food and how they are trying to help students eat less of it.

What Do Scientists Say About Junk Food?

There are scientists that study how our bodies use food. They know that food provides the fuel that keeps us alive and moving. They know that when you eat an apple, for example, your body takes in nutrients such as vitamins, fiber, and sugar. Vitamins help you grow and stay strong. Fiber helps you digest food. Sugar gives you energy. Apples also provide calories. Calories give you the energy to work, play, grow, and learn.

The nutrients in junk food often include sugar, fat, and salt. As you've read, sugar gives you energy. Fat helps you keep warm, and salt keeps water inside your body.

You need certain amounts of many nutrients every day. Too much or too little of some nutrients can make you sick. If you don't eat enough vitamin C, for example, your bones won't grow well. And if you eat too much sugar, you might not eat enough of the nutrients you need.

Look at the Nutrition Facts chart from one type of candy bar. Charts like this show you which nutrients are in a food and how much of each nutrient you need every day.

As you can see, the candy bar provides about one fourth of the total number of calories you need every day. It also has about one third of the amount of fat you need.

Photo: Nutrition facts for a commonly found candy bar. Retrieved from Nutri-Facts: <http://www.nutri-facts.com/fdlabel.php?gms=100&ndb=19155>

Scientists are also worried about things in junk food that are not nutrients. Many kinds of junk food have chemicals you don't need to grow. Some candy has chemicals to keep it soft and food dye to give it a bright color. Scientists are not sure if these things might hurt you.

Most people can eat some junk food without harming themselves. But scientists want people to know the facts about junk food so they can eat wisely and give their bodies the nutrition they need to be healthy and strong.

Nutrition Facts		Amount Needed Each Day for a Child Aged 9-13.
Serving Size Standard Measure (100g/3.5oz)		
Amount per Serving		
Calories 479 kcal		about 1/4 of total calories needed every day Calories 1,600-2,000
% Daily Value		
Total Fat 24.58 g	38%	about 1/3 of the fat needed every day Total Fat 73 grams or 400—500 calories
Saturated Fat 8.994 g	45%	
Polyunsaturated Fat 7.416 g		
Monounsaturated Fat		
Cholesterol 13 mg	5%	more than 1/10 of the total salt needed every day Salt Less than 2,200 milligrams
Sodium 266 mg	12%	
Total Carbohydrates 59.21 g	20%	almost 1/3 the total needed every day Sugar 130 grams, or 3 teaspoons
Dietary Fiber 2.5 g	10%	
Sugars 49.28 g		
Protein 8.00 g	%	
Recommended Daily Allowances		
Calories	2000	2500
Total Fat	Less than 65g	80g
Sat Fat	Less than 20g	25g
Cholesterol	Less than 300mg	300mg
Sodium	Less than 2400mg	2400mg
Total Carbohydrate	300g	375g
Dietary Fiber	25g	30g

A Balancing Act: Part 1

Susan and Maria are twins. They like to do the same things and eat the same meals. They like different snacks, though. Susan snacks on fruits and juices, but Maria snacks on candy and soda. What is the difference in calories between their snacks?

	Snacks	Calories
Susan	Apple juice + carrot sticks	$117 + 52 = 169$
Maria	Soda + candy bar	$97 + 479 = 576$

Maria's snack has about 400 more calories than Susan's. In one week, Maria will take in about 2,800 more calories than Susan. In one year, that's about 146,000 more calories!

When a person takes in more calories than he or she burns, the extra calories are stored as fat. Today, about one in three children in the United States are overweight. Children who are overweight are more likely grow up to be overweight adults. That puts them at risk of developing serious illnesses, such as heart disease.

How can Maria keep from gaining weight? She can exercise. Riding a bicycle can burn 245 calories per hour. Running can burn 327 calories per hour. Maria could also eat junk food only once a week. What do you think she should do?

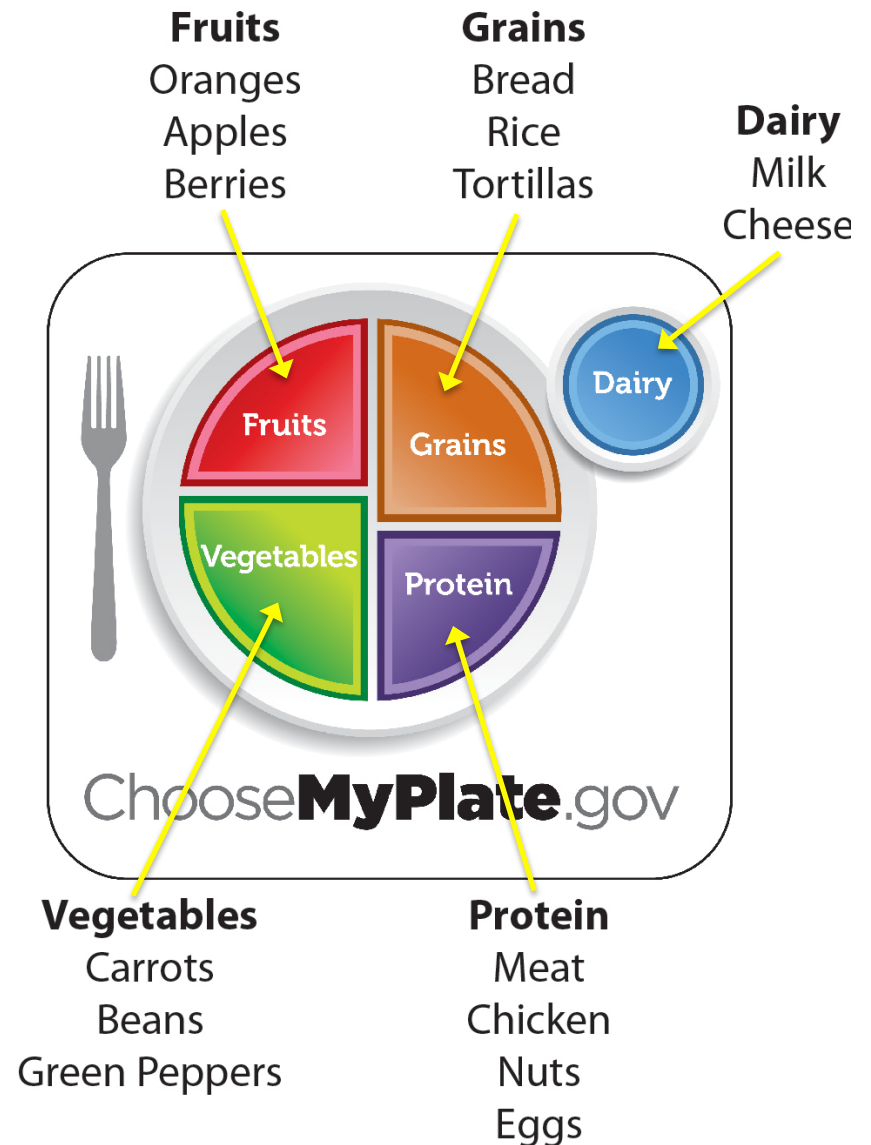


A Balancing Act: Part 2

Your body needs a variety of nutrients. If you eat only apples, you won't get the fat and salt your body needs. And if you eat only junk food, you won't get the vitamins and protein your body needs.

To stay healthy, you need to balance what you eat. You need protein, which you can get from meats, beans, and nuts. You need vitamins and minerals, which you can get from fruits and vegetables. You also need some sugar, salt, and fat. The picture shows you how much of each type of food you should eat every day.

It's okay for most healthy people to eat a little junk food. It can give you energy. However, you need to make sure you balance what you eat—you shouldn't eat junk food *instead* of healthy food. That's not a healthy habit.



Letter to Parents From a Principal

Dear Parents,

Your children's teachers have an exciting new unit on nutrition planned. Your children will read and write about nutrition. They will also have math, health, and gym lessons and science experiments centered on nutrition.

Our school is going to plant a garden. I find that children are more willing to eat vegetables that they grow themselves.

We're making changes to our lunch menus, too. We'll serve baked potatoes and fruit instead of French fries and chips. Our goal is to create a junk-food-free zone so children will make good food choices.

In addition, we won't raise money by selling candy. Instead, we'll wash cars, walk dogs, and help our neighbors.

I'm hoping you can support this topic by talking with your children about the healthy foods you enjoy and packing only healthy foods for your children. Perhaps your children can even suggest foods for your family to try.

Yours truly,
Ms. Clark

Photo: Bento snacks. ©2007 by 46137. Some rights reserved <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/deed.en>

Letter to the Editor From a Student

Dear Editor,

I'm not happy about the junk food ban in school this year. Yesterday, a teacher took away my bag of chips. I know it's important to eat healthy food, but I don't think the school should control the snacks I bring from home.

I can't focus if I don't eat a snack at recess. I mostly bring an apple or a bag of peanuts, but sometimes I bring chips or a cookie. They help me make it to lunch without getting too hungry.

I know kids shouldn't eat too much junk food, but I don't think keeping snacks away from kids will make them eat better either. Banning treats can make kids want them more!

I also think that I should be able to choose what I eat. My parents let me have junk food once or twice a week, so why should the school take my choice away?

Finally, schools sell candy to raise money for clubs and field trips. Banning sales won't keep kids from eating treats, and the school won't get the money it needs. I don't think that a junk-food ban is a very good idea.

Sincerely,
Joseph M.
A fifth grader at Wilson School

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What People in Other Countries Say About Junk Food in Schools

In Mexico, schools don't serve lunch. Lunch is the main meal of the day, and children eat it at home. But snacks are sold at recess. In September of 2010, however, a law banned the sale of sodas, sweets, and most fried foods in schools.

At first, the law was going to be stricter. But like companies in the United States, snack-food companies in Mexico are powerful, and they make a lot of money selling snacks in schools. So they figured out ways to keep selling snacks. They made their snacks smaller, and they made them with less fat.

Some schools allow parents with food carts to sell food they cook themselves. They offer more healthy food, such as sandwiches, salads, and fruit. But if the students don't like the food, they don't buy it. Also, other food carts sell cheaper junk food right outside the school.

Like the United States, Mexico has growing numbers of children who are overweight. Almost one in three Mexican children are overweight. That number is three times higher than it was 30 years ago. People also eat

fewer vegetables and drink more sugary drinks than they did 15 years ago. People who weigh more tend to get sick more often.

The principal of an elementary school in Mexico City stopped allowing snack-food sales at recess. Instead, students can buy a hot meal, such as rice, tortillas, squash, and cheese. The students can also have a fruit cup or an ice pop for dessert. By showing them how good healthy food can taste, the school is teaching students how to choose food wisely. And it is seeing some success. Some students are now bringing more healthy snacks from home, too.



What do you think?

Describe five foods you like to eat. What do you like about each one?

How often do you snack? What do you eat for snack? When you're hungry, how do you decide what to eat?

Do you think students eat too much junk food?

Do you think schools should teach students about healthy eating? Should they change what they serve for lunch and snacks? Should they tell students what to bring from home?

Think about the foods you ate this week. Did you eat healthy foods, like vegetables, as well as junk food, like candy bars? Did you eat one kind of food more than the other?

Should junk food be banned in schools?

Yes, I think junk food should be banned because...	No, I don't think junk food should be banned because...
What kind of foods would you ban? What kind of food would you offer for school lunch?	How might having choices in what students eat at school help them later in life?