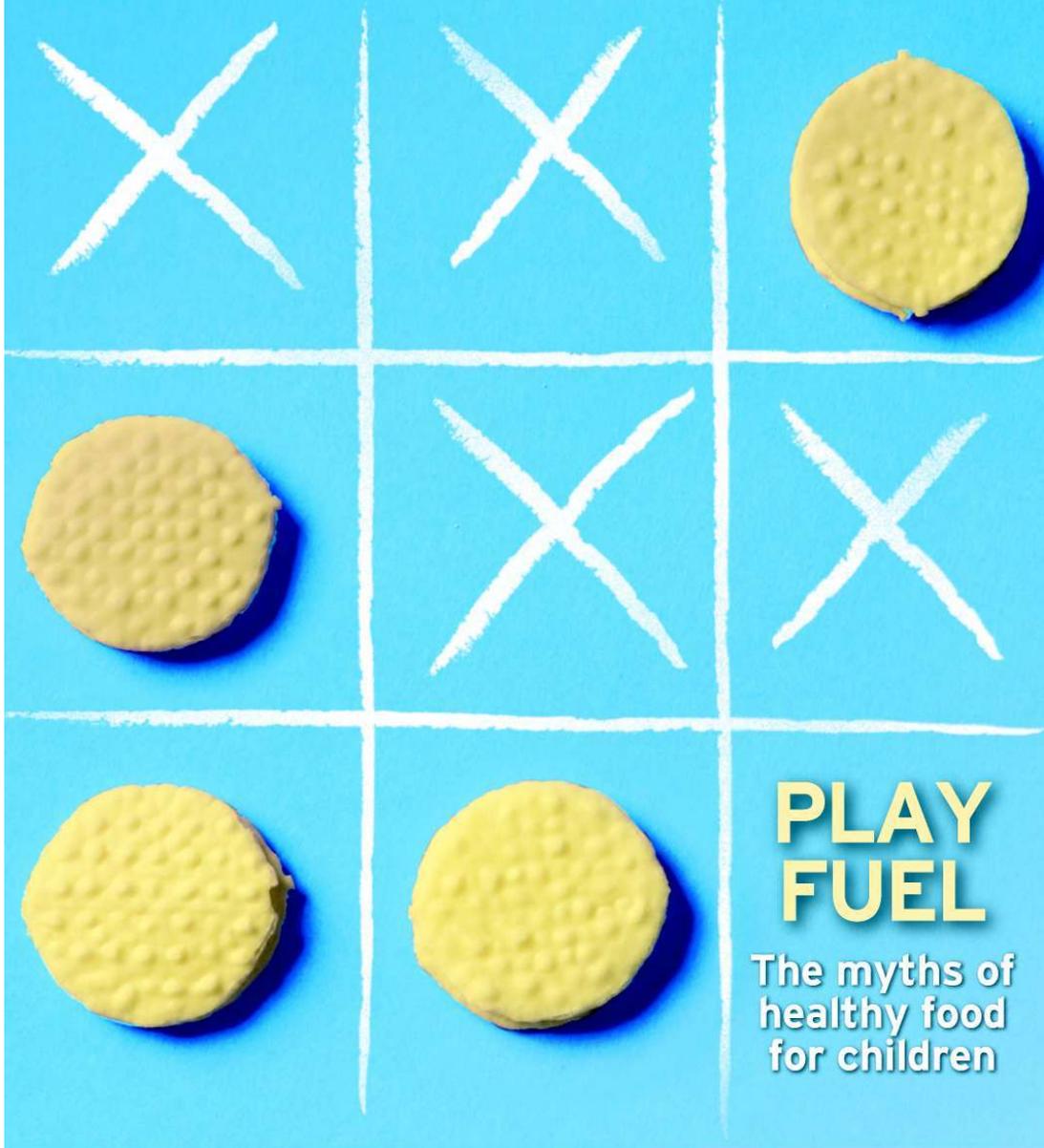


Good Living

JULY 14, 2009

The Sydney Morning Herald



PLAY FUEL

The myths of
healthy food
for children

Who's winning the food fight?

Despite some progress, the battle against poor diets and obesity in children – rich or poor – is a long way from over.

A NEW national survey on Australian diets confirms children from poorer families tend to eat more junk food and are more likely to be overweight. It also shows nearly all children, rich or poor, fat or slim, consume more sugar and salt than they should while hardly any teenagers eat enough fresh fruit and vegetables.

As a canteen volunteer at a large, private girls' school on Sydney's north shore for almost eight years, I've seen an enormous change in the food served.

Gone is the tuckshop tucker of my generation: pies, chips, cream buns and paper bags of sweets. Instead we serve vegetarian pies, sushi, burrito wraps, noodles, salad boxes, pasta bakes, soy crisps and fruit leather.

Made over as a "health canteen", the food is designed to combat childhood obesity and inactive lifestyles. These issues can set the scene for type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and heart troubles later in life.

Yet from kindergarten to year 12, none of the girls at this school appear to be overweight, let alone obese. You have to head west to see the socio-economic differences evident in junk food diets and child obesity.

"It's the rich-poor divide," University of South Australia's Professor Timothy Olds confirms. Olds is a research co-ordinator for the newly released 2007 Australian national survey of children's nutrition and physical activity.

"Rich kids have better access to healthy fare and their parents monitor their intake more," he says. "Poor kids, however, eat more sausages and mince and more fast food, soft drink and chips but less fresh fruit, vegetables and whole grains."

So, the nutritional intake for rich and poor children may be different – but are their long-term health prospects significantly different? A human nutrition research fellow at CSIRO, Dr Rebecca

Golley, who also worked on the national survey, says the diets of most Australian children, whether they are rich or poor, are in need of help.

The survey involved more than 4400 children, aged two to 16. Only about half of nine- to 13-year-olds ate the recommended one to three serves of fresh fruit a day, while 3 per cent ate the suggested two to four serves of vegetables.

As children get older, fresh produce and dairy are replaced by more snacks and soft drinks. The fruit intake of 61 per cent of four- to eight-year-olds was adequate, compared with 1 per cent of 14- to 16-year-olds. For vegetables, 22 per cent of four- to eight-year-old children met the dietary guidelines compared with only 5 per cent of 14- to 16-year-olds.

"Unfortunately fruit, vegetables and dairy foods are being replaced by foods high in kilojoules, salt and saturated fat," Golley says.

Sugar and sugary foods contributed to 24 per cent of total kilojoule intake; this should not exceed 20 per cent. All the children also had too much salt in their diet.

Yet finding healthy food that children want to eat is tough. The Healthy Kids School Canteen Association (HKSCA) has approved more than 800 products under its Healthy Kids scheme, which mirrors the State Government's Fresh Tastes@School strategy. Items are colour-coded: green means "eat up", amber warns "select carefully" and red foods, such as soft drinks or doughnuts, are banned for daily sale and served only twice a term as treats.

However, HKSCA dietitian Jane Dibbs says it's difficult for food companies to make the green category for snacks.

"Fruit, milk, yoghurt, sultanas and whole-grain breads are easy," she says. "But trying to find nutritious alternatives to potato chips, muesli bars or chocolate

bars is hard yakka.”

Manufacturers have developed pies, crumbed chicken, fried rice and individual pasta dishes with less salt and less saturated fat. They’ve also been creative with smaller serves of ice-creams and savoury packet snacks, aiming to get them under 1000 kilojoules per 100 grams.

However, even when companies successfully reformulate their products, they often don’t sell quickly enough to last. “We approved an excellent 100 per cent fruit bar from Go Natural last year – high in fibre, not much sugar and good taste,” Dibbs says. “But it didn’t take off in the supermarkets and now it’s hard to find.”

Salt is also a huge hidden problem, according to Jacqui Webster, senior project manager with the George Institute for International Health and co-ordinator of the Australian division of the World Action on Salt and Health (AWASH), a professional group promoting a population-wide reduction in salt.

“Everyday food children regularly eat, such as bread, breakfast cereals, processed meats, cheese and takeaway meals, are the real culprits,” Webster says. Just one ham

and cheese sandwich provides three-quarters of all the salt a four- to eight-year-old should have in a day.

“We want parents to check food labels and buy the lowest in sodium,” she says. In cornflakes, for instance, the variation is enormous – one brand contains 200 times more salt per 100 grams than another.

As well as diet, the survey finds that activity levels make a real difference. Better-off families can afford more extra-curricular sports. However, all children spend too much time sitting in front of a screen whether it’s a TV, computer or video game, averaging three to four hours a day.

According to Olds, about one quarter of the children surveyed were overweight or obese. “This number hasn’t increased over the last decade or so and that’s encouraging but it’s still far too high,” he says.

‘Trying to find nutritious alternatives to potato chips, muesli bars or chocolate bars is hard yakka.’ Dietitian Jane Dibbs



Keep an eye on . . .

Rice crisps or crackers

Viewed as the healthy children’s snack, these thin crisp rounds grab attention with claims they are 97 per cent fat- and gluten-free. The downside is they’re loaded with salt and flavour enhancers. One 25g serve – or 10 to 12 crackers – delivers 440kJ and 20g of carbs.

Hot instant noodle soups

A polystyrene tub of chicken chow mein flavoured Fantastic noodles has 8g saturated fat, 48g carbohydrates and 1061mg sodium. “Great in convenience but little in nutrition,” says Jane Dibbs, dietitian with the Healthy Kids School Canteen Association.

Muesli bars

Often regarded as healthier than biscuits or cake, these single-serve bars are no longer the humble oats-and-dried fruit fingers of old. Often, they are a high-sugar processed version of best-selling children’s cereals. A 2006 Choice survey of 150 brands found most have more than 20 per cent sugar and some deliver more saturated fat than a packet

of chips. Even the fruit in them can be a sham – a laboratory creation of fruity flavours, gels and sugar.

Natural jellies and jubes

Sales of jellies, snakes and fruit jubes made without artificial colours, flavours or preservatives are booming. But you’ll consume the same kilojoules and sugar as regular lollies when eating Allen’s (owned by Nestle) or Natural Confectionery Company (Cadbury Schweppes). A 50g serve (about 6 snakes) packs on 710kJ and 39g carbs.

Boost juices

The high content of natural fruit sugars in juices make them a high kilojoule trap for children – especially sedentary ones. A typical 500ml container is equivalent to five or six pieces of whole fruit minus the fibre and with 800kJ.

Fruit leather or fruit straps

They boast no added sugar, nothing artificial and 100 per cent fruit. Some, made from apple or peach or nectarine, are low GI. Reading the pack, an unsuspecting parent would think their children were getting the equivalent of three or four pieces of fresh fruit. Like

dried fruit, it’s concentrated in fruit sugars and calorific – a hefty 60 per cent natural sugars even though there’s no added sugar – so eat in small quantities.

Apricot delights

Sweet and moreish, these apricot-based squares are more akin to confectionery than dried fruit. At 82 per cent carbohydrate, they have twice the carb content of plain dried apricots.

Sports drinks and sports waters

Now fizzy drinks are banned from schools, sports drinks have filled the gap. For most children, sports drinks – with 6 per cent sugar, artificial colours and extra salts – are unnecessary.

Breakfast cereals

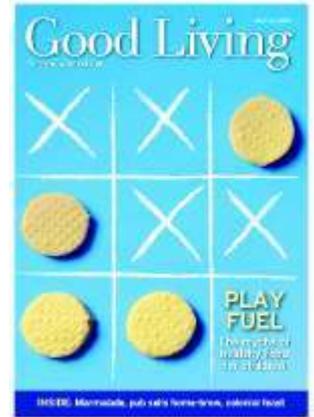
Choice believes cereals aimed at kids are among the worst foods for nutrition. Its latest report of 152 cereals (May 2009) found most have too much sugar and many have too much salt. Cereals high in sugar (defined as more than 15 per cent) and low in fibre (less than 1.5g from a 30g bowl) are Cocoa Bombs, Nutri-Grain, Coco Pops, Coco Pops Chex, Froot Loops, Frosties, Rice Bubbles, Crispix Honey and Aldi Choco Rice and Choco Balls.

Healthy options

- Fresh fruit and fruit salad.
- Dried fruit, e.g. mini sultana packs.
- Plain nuts.
- Cheese sticks made from real cheese e.g. Bega Stringers.
- Cheese and cracker snack packs, e.g. Mainland Munchables, 35g pack of four cheese slices and four rice crackers.
- Plain popcorn or lower-salt popcorn.
- Crispbreads, crackers, rice or corn cakes (reduced salt where possible).
- Reduced-fat plain sweet biscuits.
- Mini yoghurt tubs, e.g. Petit Miam, Dairy Farmers Squeeze (look for ones with less than 15g of sugars per 100g).
- Water.
- Flavoured milk.
- Any snack with less than 600kJ, 5g saturated fat and 400mg sodium per 100g, along with other nutritional benefits like wholegrain, low GI, extra calcium or iron.



Snack attack ... rice crackers are popular with children but need to be watched.
Photo: Quentin Jones



Cover: Noughts, crosses and crackers.
Photo: Quentin Jones
Illustration: Dan Morley