

Are School Lunches a Ticket to Healthy Eating?

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MONDAY, Sept. 14, 2020 (HealthDay News) -- Healthier school meals improve the diets of American children, a new study finds.

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act took effect in 2012 and required school meals to include more whole grains, fruits and vegetables, and less sodium.

To assess how the act affected students' diets, researchers analyzed data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey 2007-2016, which gathered information on everything children ate over two separate 24-hour periods and the sources of their foods.

After the act was implemented, eating school meals improved how students' diets met key recommendations of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, according to the study published recently in the journal *Annals of Epidemiology*.

School meals provide a substantial proportion of the food (10%) eaten by U.S. children and teens throughout the year, according to the researchers.

"Findings from our study suggest that the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act improved the quality of U.S. kids' diets, which sets them up for healthier lives," said study leader Aaron Berger, who conducted the study while a doctoral student at the University of Minnesota School of Public Health.

"We are pleased to see that school meals continue to be provided during COVID-19 school closures, given that otherwise many households would not have this food security during the challenging economic circumstances that have come with the pandemic," he said in a university news release.

When schools return to normal routines, communities and families should encourage students to eat school meals because they benefit from the dietary requirements of the act, according to Berger.

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