

Tucking into healthier options at school

It's that time of the year again. Kids are back at school after the long and hopefully enjoyable and revitalising summer break! For kids to achieve the most out of their school year, it is advised that they eat smart by making healthier food choices. Very low fat or restricted diets are not recommended - rather focus on a healthy, balanced approach.

Parents and care-givers play a pivotal role in a child's life and therefore can influence what children eat daily. As children are still growing, we need to slow down the rate of weight gain, if overweight, but not growth. The availability of healthy food choices within the care environment and lunchboxes packed from home can positively influence a child's nutritional intake. A child also spends most of his/her day at school, and so their environment should be changed to a healthy one. Young children are easily influenced by their peers and popular trends, hence making school hours a perfect time to expose them to healthier foods. The school tuck shop or canteen is easily accessible to children and is therefore a great way to start providing them with suitable food choices.

It is best to place limits on the not-so-healthy food choices e.g. confectionery, chips and take-away foods.

Although, if these foods are eaten only occasionally, they will do no harm, but if eaten too often it may result in:

- Poor intake of other foods that are nutritious e.g. fruit and vegetables.
- High energy intake and the risk of becoming overweight.
- High cost compared to homemade snacks and lunches.
- Increased risk of tooth decay.
- Missed opportunity to teach children about food preparation and planning.

The Heart and Stroke Foundation SA, has a School Tuck Shop Programme designed to address the problem of unhealthy eating amongst school children. The main objective of the Programme is to enable children to make healthier choices when faced with a range of options. To achieve this we endeavor to encourage school tuck shops to serve more nutritious snacks and meals daily. It requires that schools set nutrition standards for all foods sold at school, including foods in vending machines and tuck shops. We will address changes to school tuck shops and lunches; including increased offerings of fruits, vegetables and whole grain foods; providing more baked foods instead of deep fried foods; placing limits on the fat, sugar and caloric (energy) content of foods served.

The Heart and Stroke Foundation SA believes that there is an important connection between a healthy diet and: Healthy growth and development.

- A learner's capacity to learn and perform effectively and optimally.
- The development of diseases of lifestyle at a young age as well as later in life.
- The decrease or prevention of the development of obesity.
- Improved sports performance.
- Minimised hyperactive behaviour.

The Heart and Stroke Foundation SA commits to:

Provide the schools with assistance, advice and guidance as to how to make the tuck shop healthier.
Provide training to tuck shop staff (if based in Cape Town).
Provide a quarterly seasonal newsletter via e-mail (called Break Time) which contains useful information on how to adapt to a healthier lifestyle.

If your school is not yet part of our Programme, please feel free to contact us. We will gladly assist you in changing your school tuck shop or canteen to an accredited heart healthy one.

Contact Ayesha Seedat, a Registered Dietician, via: email: ayesha@heartfoundation.co.za or Tel: 021 447 4222

Join in and help us make South Africa's kids healthier!

Written by Ayesha Seedat, Registered Dietician, The Heart and Stroke Foundation SA