SNDA III Study Results Indicate Improvements Needed in School Meals

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PURPOSE/OBJECTIVE

To provide up-to-date information on the school meal programs (including the National School Lunch Program [NSLP] and the School Breakfast Program [SBP]), and the nutrient content of school meals from data collected during the third School Nutrition Dietary Assessment Study (SNDA-III).

METHOD

SNDA-III data were collected from a stratified sample of schools and are representative of all public School Food Authorities (SFAs) that offer the NSLP in the contiguous United States during the 2004-2005 academic year.

- School district food services were surveyed where the directors substantiated eligibility for school meals reimbursement.
- Those included in the survey: 129 SFAs, 398 schools in those SFAs, and 2,314 children attending those schools (and their parents).

RESULTS

- In general, with a few exceptions, the type of menu planning method used (nutrient-based, enhanced food-based, or traditional food based) had little effect on the calorie or nutrient content of the meals served.
- Only 13% of schools offered breakfast menus that met all the calorie and nutrient breakfast School Meal Initiative (SMI) standards.
- Only 7% of schools had students who took meals that met all the SMI breakfast standards.
- Only 7% of schools offered lunch meals that met all the SMI standards while only 2 % of schools had students who took meals that met all the SMI standards.
- The most common standards that were not met were fat, saturated fat and sodium.
    - One in five schools served lunches that met the total fat standard based on the 1995 Dietary Guidelines, which recommend fat intake at or less than 30% of calories.
    - The 2005 Dietary Guidelines recommend fat intake between 25% to 35% of calories. Based on this benchmark, 60% of schools met the total fat recommendation.
    - Only 30% of schools met the saturated fat standard (<10% of calories).
    - More than two thirds of schools (66% of elementary schools and 76% of secondary schools) still serve meals that do not meet the standards for saturated fat.
    - Essentially, none of the schools served lunches that met the sodium benchmark based on the 2005 Dietary Guidelines.
- More than 85% of schools *offered* reimbursable lunches that met the School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children (SMI) standards for each of the key target nutrients: protein, vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium, and iron.
- Students from the largest schools (greater than 1,000 students) have a greater chance of being presented with adequate breakfast calories than smaller schools based on the SMI standards. This also results in the students from the largest schools selecting foods with more calories than students in smaller schools.
- There was a greater chance that schools didn't meet the SMI energy standard for breakfast if the school had a high rate of students who qualified for free and reduced meals. This was true for both the breakfast that was offered and the breakfast that the students took.
- There was a greater chance that schools didn't meet the SMI energy standard for breakfast if the school was small (less than 500 students). This is true for both the breakfast presented and taken by students.

APPLICATION

- The results of this study can help school nutrition directors focus on ways to reduce fat, saturated fat, and sodium in their school meals.
- Foods that contribute the most fat and saturated fat in meals are:
    - Fat: salad dressings, condiments/spreads, pizza products, peanut butter sandwiches, and french fries
    - Saturated Fat: full-fat milk, cheese, and fatty meats
- More analysis is needed to determine why schools that have high rates of students who qualify for free and reduced lunches have a greater likelihood to present breakfasts that do not meet the SMI calorie standards because this impacts what the student takes and presumably eats.
- More analysis is also need to determine why the larger schools have a greater likelihood to present breakfast that meets the SMI standards because this impacts what the student takes and presumably eats.

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