

School-Based Efforts Boost Kids' Fruit, Vegetable Intake

THURSDAY, Sept. 18 (HealthDay News) -- Children will eat fruits and vegetables at school, if the school gives them a push, a new report says.

Researchers at the University of Maryland found three equally successful approaches based on teacher training with a tested curriculum and events that sometimes included parents. The biggest difference maker, though, was repeated exposure -- through taste testing -- to fruits and vegetables.

"Fruits and vegetables are a key contributor to children's health," lead investigator Bonnie Braun, an associate professor in the university's Department of Family Science, said in news release issued by the school. "Unfortunately, national reports indicate that children's consumption of these foods normally decreases from kindergarten to fifth grade. Students from low-income families are particularly at risk of inadequate intake."

Braun's team, which focused on elementary schools where at least half the population was eligible for the free or reduced lunch program, found that if schools increase fruits and vegetables on their cafeteria lines, children must be willing to eat them.

"Our hypothesis was that school-based interventions, focused on increasing children's preference for fruits and vegetables, would be associated with an increase in consumption both in school and at home," Braun said.

Prior to the interventions, not even one of 10 students (7 percent) was eating the recommended five fruits and vegetables a day. In fact, seven of 10 (70 percent) ate fewer than three servings of fruits and vegetables daily; of those, more than half (56 percent) ate fewer than two servings.

After the interventions, 60 percent of the students increased their taste for fruits and vegetables, and half either maintained their higher-than-average intake or increased intake.