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SCHOOL FOOD: BAD FOR YOUR CHILD'S HEALTH?

Are you trying hard to provide healthy food choices at home, only to find that your kids give in to unhealthy snacks and drinks obtainable either from vending machines or snack bars at school? These unhealthy substances can put general health as well as teeth at risk.

There is some good news: The Healthy Hunger - Free Kids Act was passed in 2010. It required the USDA to revamp its school snack standards (which hadn't been revised for 30 years!). The Smart Snacks in School rules affect "competitive foods," which are snacks sold in vending machines, a la carte lunch lines, fundraisers and in student stores. The rules set limits on calories, fats, sugar and sodium and encourage the consumption of dairy, whole grains, protein, fruits and vegetables. Schools must comply with these rules by July 1, 2014. **One third** of American children are at risk for preventable diseases such as diabetes and heart disease because they are overweight or obese! The new standards will help prevent this.

"Many parents are working hard every day to make sure they provide healthy, balanced meals and snacks to their kids. Unfortunately, we don't always have control over the snacks our kids have access to when they're away from home. That's why, as a mom myself, I am so excited that schools will now be offering healthier choices to students and reinforcing the work we do at home to help our kids stay healthy." First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama.

But, despite the changes, many harmful items for dental health are still allowed. For example some schools still sell sugary chocolate milk that promotes tooth decay can still be sold as long as it is fat-free. Also, highly acidic diet beverages that erode tooth enamel despite being sugarless will still be allowed in high schools. What can you do about this? Get Involved. If your schools are selling snacks and beverages that you do not think are healthy contact your school officials along with other parents who feel the same way. The bottom line is: we parents are ultimately responsible for ensuring that their children make healthy food and beverage choices.

Set limits. Make sure your children understand what they are allowed to buy at school and why. Help them understand that obesity and serious diseases that

can shorten a person's life expectancy including heart disease and diabetes, can start in childhood with the consumption of too much sugar and unhealthy foods. If you don't think your kids can spend snack money appropriately, provide them with healthy snacks to take to school instead. Remember that sugar is the most important dietary factor causing tooth decay. Natural sugar contained in whole fresh fruits, vegetables, and starch-rich staple foods (bread and rice for example) are not as harmful to teeth, and are good for healthier snacks. Sticky sweet fruits like dates and raisins are more like candy and should be limited.

Start teaching your kids healthy habits when they are young so they will have a basic understanding of nutrition, oral health, and what you expect of them. Studies show that age-appropriate nutrition education actually does result in kids making better decisions. It is up to us to show them the way!



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