

Media Release

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High sugar diet and not enough vegetables

Aussie parents struggle to make healthy food choices for their kids

Aussie kids aren't getting enough vegetables in their diet, and many Australian parents believe fruit drinks may be healthier than water, the latest [RCH National Child Health Poll](#) has revealed.

When it comes to sugar, over a quarter of parents surveyed mistakenly believe that fruit drinks may be a healthier drink option than water, a third of Aussie kids are regularly consuming sugar-sweetened drinks, and almost a third (29%) of parents incorrectly believe children may need sports drinks to recover from regular physical activity.

Dr Anthea Rhodes, director of the RCH National Child Health Poll and RCH paediatrician, said sugar can be confusing for parents when it comes to food choices.

"This study tells us that the majority of parents are confused about which foods are healthy and which foods aren't, especially when it comes to choosing the right foods for their kids. With one in four Australian children overweight or obese, it's vital that parents are supported to make healthy food choices for their families. Most parents (66%) said they find it hard to know how much added sugar is in food. Sugar in drinks can be especially confusing, water is always the healthiest option and kids should be encouraged to drink more water," she said.

Aussie kids aren't getting the daily recommended intake of vegetables with the poll revealing that more than nine out of ten (95%) of school-aged children don't eat the recommended daily serves of vegetables. Only one in four parents are aware of the recommended daily intake of vegetables for their child, which is around five serves per day.

"A lack of whole fruits and vegetables in the diet can mean children are at risk of not getting enough fibre and essential nutrients, such as iron and vitamin C. This can have immediate and long-term health consequences," Dr Rhodes said.

"We also found that four out of five primary school-aged kids don't know how to cook, or prepare food, and nearly half (44%) of teenagers rarely or never help to cook dinner. But if kids are involved in the kitchen it helps them to learn about food and they are also more likely to eat a meal if they have helped to prepare it," Dr Rhodes added.

The poll also revealed that treats may no longer be treats, with parents reporting that almost half of pre-schoolers are regularly receiving treat foods most days of the week.

"Foods and drinks containing saturated fat, added salt and added sugars have been directly linked to serious health problems in children, such as obesity and tooth decay."

"It's recommended that treat foods such as lollies, chocolate, processed meat and fried food should be consumed by children infrequently and in small amounts, not on a daily basis," Dr Rhodes added.

Despite one in four Australian children being overweight or obese, only one in eight children in this poll were considered to be overweight or obese by their parents.

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Dr Rhodes said it can be difficult for parents to recognise if their child is overweight, and parents are advised to speak with their GP or child health nurse if they are concerned.

To promote a healthy weight, parents should watch portion sizes, offer healthy snack options and decrease takeaway foods and sugary drinks. Physical activity is important too; try walking to and from school, if you can, try to find regular opportunities to be active with your child.

"Having a conversation with your child about healthy bodies and healthy weight can help too. It's about forming healthy habits as a whole family. Temptation is everywhere so removing temptation from your own pantry is always a good place to start."

Dr Rhodes said it was positive to see that most Aussie kids still get a home-cooked meal most nights of the week.

"It was great to see that most parents said their child has a home-cooked dinner most nights of the week, despite challenges such as a lack of time or energy."

"Parents make decisions every day, often many times a day, about food for their kids and it can be really tricky to know what's healthy and how to stick to the right thing. More education and clearer food labelling are some ways that parents could be better supported in making healthy food choices for their families," Dr Rhodes said.

Overall key findings;

- Over half of parents (57%) say it is hard to know which foods are healthy choices when buying food for their family
- Two thirds of parents (67%) find it hard to know how much added sugar is in the food products they buy for their children
- More than nine out of ten school-aged children don't eat the recommended daily serves of vegetables
- Parents are giving their children too many treat foods, with almost half (41%) of pre-schoolers receiving treat foods most days of the week
- A third of children (35%) regularly consume sugar-sweetened drinks, with one in six preschoolers having sugar-sweetened drinks almost every day
- Over a quarter of parents (26%) mistakenly believe fruit drinks may be a healthier choice than water
- Almost a third (29%) of parents incorrectly believe children may need sports drinks to recover from regular physical activity.
- More than a third (37%) of school aged children have not been taught how to cook or prepare food and almost half (44%) of teenagers rarely or never help to make dinner
- Despite one in four Australian children being overweight or obese, only one in eight children in this poll were considered to be overweight or obese by their parents
- Parents also indicate cost is a barrier to making healthy food choices, with three quarters (77%) of parents saying that they believe healthy food is generally more expensive than unhealthy food.

Data source

The ninth RCH National Child Health Poll was a survey of a nationally representative sample of 1,980 parents of children aged 0-18 years. Collectively respondents had 3,704 children. The survey was conducted during October 2017 by an independent research agency on behalf of The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne. Findings are based on analysis of data weighted to reflect population characteristics of Australian parents of children 0-18 years from the latest Australian Bureau of Statistics Census Data.

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