



Study: Children eat too much junk

I've heard that children get most of their calories from snacks and desserts. Can that be right?

Not quite, but, unfortunately, you're not that far off the mark.

A study in the October 2010 *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* revealed that nearly 40 percent of the calories consumed by children and teens between 2 and 18 years old are "empty calories," or solid fats (primarily saturated fat and trans fat) and added sugars. Of course, empty calories can come from foods other than snacks and desserts — think Friday night pizza and fast-food burgers — but the message is clear: The "balance" part of "a healthy, balanced diet" is way out of whack for a good chunk of our younger population.

The study, conducted by researchers with the National Institutes of Health, found that the top three sources of all calories for 2- to 18-year-olds were grain-based desserts (including cake, cookies, donuts, pie and granola bars), pizza, and soft drinks (including energy and sports drinks and sweetened bottled water). When looking at just solid fats, the major sources were pizza, grain-based desserts, whole milk, regular cheese, and fatty meats (sausage, franks, bacon and ribs). When looking at just added sugars, top sources were soft drinks, fruit drinks, grain-based desserts, dairy-based desserts (such as ice cream), and candy.

Putting all this information together revealed that about half the empty calories consumed by children and adolescents came from just six sources: soft drinks, fruit drinks (not 100 percent juice), dairy-based desserts, grain-based desserts, pizza, and whole milk.

Under the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, everyone is permitted some allowance for empty (or "discretionary") calories — anywhere from 8 percent to 20 percent of total calories depending on a person's age and activity level. But in all age groups that the researchers examined (ages 2-3, 4-8, 9-13 and 14-18), children and teens far out-consumed their allowance by more than double, or in some cases, triple, the amount recommended. In fact, 9- to 18-year-olds met or exceeded their discretionary calorie allowance with consumption of soft drinks and fruit drinks alone.

Clearly, the over-consumption of empty calories is one reason why more than 3 in 10 children and adolescents in the United States are overweight or obese. This study reinforces what most of us have known all along: Focusing on a healthy, *balanced* diet and reducing intake of high-sugar beverages, high-sugar and high-fat desserts, and pizza, could go a long way to slimming down our youth.

Chow Line is a service of Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to *Chow Line*, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH, 43210-1044, or filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu.



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