

Do childcare menus meet nutrition guidelines? Quantity, variety and quality of food provided in New Zealand early childhood education services ^[1]

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Abstract

Objective: To describe food provision and evaluate menus in New Zealand childcare services, determining associations with service characteristics and/or cost of menu. **Methods:** Licensed services in three regions of New Zealand participated in an online survey, uploading a weekly menu where applicable. Menus were scored for compliance with guidelines on quantity, variety and quality of foods served. Bivariate and multivariate associations between menu score and service characteristics were analysed. **Results:** A total of 257 services participated (30% of 847 services invited). Food was provided daily in 56%, with 34% providing lunch and snacks daily. Of the 57 full menus analysed, only three (5%) met all 10 scoring criteria (mean score of 6.8/10). Higher menu scores were statistically associated with employing a cook, high and low (not medium) neighbourhood deprivation, the Heart Foundation's Healthy Heart Award program; there was no association with food costs. The Healthy Heart Award remained statistically associated with higher menu score after adjustment for other service characteristics. **Conclusion:** Most menus did not meet current nutrition guidelines for quantity, variety, and limiting 'sometimes' and 'occasional' foods. **Implications for public health:** This study provides a baseline for monitoring menu compliance in New Zealand and evidence for nutrition promotion and menu improvement programmes in early education.

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