

New Brunswick child-care centres missing the mark on nutrition, study finds ^[1]

Lunches and snacks served are high in sugar and sodium, low in fibre, says researcher

Author:

Source: CBC News

Format: Article

Publication Date: 11 Nov 2017

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The food served at New Brunswick child-care centres is not meeting nutritional recommendations, according to a new report published in the Canadian Journal of Public Health.

Researchers analyzed the food served at 24 child-care centres in New Brunswick and 37 in Saskatchewan.

"We saw lots of fries and chicken nuggets and fish sticks and elbow macaroni," said Stephanie Ward, a registered dietitian and one of the authors of the report, entitled "Lunch is ready ... but not healthy."

"Processed foods are definitely hot items," said Ward, who teaches nutrition courses at the University of Moncton.

The lunches and snacks were low in calories and fibre, but had high sugar and sodium content, the study found.

One lunch might contain 500 grams of sodium, which is "quite a bit" for a three- or four-year-old, said Ward. And that doesn't include whatever other sodium the child might consume during breakfast, supper and snacks.

In addition, the child-care centres are generally not offering one full serving of the four food groups, as recommended in the Canada Food Guide, she said.

"There's definitely room for improvement."

'Interventions are required'

Ward thinks part of the problem is that pre-schoolers tend to be picky eaters and child-care centres have limited budgets.

"Sometimes they're reluctant to actually be serving those servings of vegetables or whole grains, or even plant-based proteins like legumes and tofu ... because they're worried that kids aren't going to eat them and that there's going to be waste."

So they may opt for "kid-friendly" pre-packaged foods.

But child-care centre staff can learn how to introduce those types of foods in fun ways so the children will actually try them and eat them, said Ward.

She hopes to see the province develop comprehensive nutrition guidelines and better resources for child-care centres.

"Interventions are required to improve the quality of foods offered in [child-care] centres," the report concludes.

It's important, said Ward, because the eating habits children develop during their first five years tend to stay with them for life.

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