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A cross-sectional assessment of food and nutrient based standards applied to British school children’s packed lunches

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Conflict of interest

CELE and JEC have no further financial support. CELE and JEC have no other relationships with companies that might have an interest in the submitted work. CELE and JEC have no non-financial interests that may be relevant to the submitted work.

Statement on ethics

This study was approved by the University of Leeds Ethics Committee. The trial registry code is ISRCTN77710993.

Author contributions

CELE designed the research protocol and statistical analysis plan, CELE wrote the first manuscript, carried out the analysis and contributed to all versions of the manuscript. JEC secured the funding for the original project and contributed to all versions of the manuscript.
ABSTRACT

Purpose: In England, standards for school meals included both foods and nutrients until 2015. School policies for packed lunches are generally food based; research is needed to determine whether these are adequate or whether a small number of nutrients would potentially improve their quality.

Methods: Dietary data from 1294 British children in 89 schools, aged 8-9 years taking a packed lunch were included. A diet quality score (DQS) for lunches was calculated using the number of standards met out of 21 (8 foods and 13 nutrients). Multilevel regression analysis determined the foods and nutrients contributing to variation in the DQS.

Results: The optimal model included all 8 foods and 7/13 nutrients; explaining 72% of the variance in DQS. Folate, iron and vitamin C, together with the 8 food groups explained 70% of DQS variation.

Conclusions: Ideally, policies for school packed lunches should include food based standards plus recommendations based on a small number of nutrients.
INTRODUCTION

Ensuring that children eat a high quality diet is a key component of public health programmes aiming to reduce childhood obesity. National age-specific recommended levels of foods and nutrients are set by many countries in Europe, the USA, and Australia. A nutritious diet contains foods such as fruits and vegetables, protein, and dairy foods rich in micronutrients; and is low in fats, particularly saturated fat, added sugars, and salt.

In England, nutrient and food-based standards exist for school meals. The food-based standards restrict use of fatty and fried foods, snacks, foods high in sugar including sweetened drinks/snacks and encourage increased consumption of fruits and vegetables. In addition to food-based standards, there are a total of 14 nutrient standards for school meals (13 nutrients plus energy) four have a maximum level (total fat, saturated fat, added sugars and sodium) and nine have a minimum level (protein, carbohydrate, fibre, vitamin A, vitamin C, folate, calcium, iron, and zinc). The standard for energy has a tolerance of 5% below and above the standard. A move towards food rather than nutrient-based standards resulted from The School Food Plan in January 2015, however its impact on quality of school food has not yet been fully evaluated. Packed lunches are not required to meet these same standards but many schools follow government recommendations and have a food-based packed lunch policy in place to improve the quality of food brought from home at lunchtime.

Simple but effective methods to assess the quality of children’s meals, whether provided at school or brought from home are required. Tools to assess overall dietary quality have been designed for both adults and children but not for specific meal times. Measures of dietary quality in children include the Healthy Eating Index for children and the revised diet quality index, both of which are from the USA and are based on daily food intake.

The European Commission has recently published a report on the 34 school food policies in 30 countries in Europe. Out of the total, 31 policies included food-based standards and 23, nutrient-based standards. Policies for packed lunches exist in some schools and consist of food-based recommendations by individual schools rather than legally binding regional standards. However, it is not known whether these recommendations are sufficient to ensure a high-quality lunch brought from home as research has been carried out in school meals but not in packed lunches.

The aims of this research are two-fold. Firstly, to analyse children’s lunches brought from home to identify the most important nutrients that predict a good quality packed lunch compared with recommended and restricted foods and secondly to suggest a method to measure lunch quality that can be used to assess lunches brought from home. These results will enable schools to make simple and informed recommendations as part of a packed lunch policy that build on existing food-based guidelines.


METHODS

Study design

Data was collected in 2006 from 1294 children attending 29 primary schools randomly selected from all state schools across the four regions in the UK; England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. One class of children in year 4 (aged 8 to 9 years) was randomly sampled from each primary school. The data analysed here are part of a cluster randomised controlled trial to improve packed lunches and further details on sampling procedures are provided in published papers. Dietary data was collected using a weighed dietary assessment tool designed to measure the food in children’s packed lunches. Individual foods were weighed whenever possible and entered under the following categories: drinks, sandwiches, savoury snacks, vegetables, fruit and sweet snacks. Sandwiches and mixed salads were weighed in their entirety and different parts of the sandwich were estimated based on reported average portion sizes. Thirteen nutrients included in the nutrient standards for school meals in England (excluding energy as it has both a maximum and minimum standard) were calculated for each child’s lunch using Dante; a programme designed in-house based on the 6th edition of the composition of foods. These were total and saturated fat (g), carbohydrate (g), non-milk extrinsic sugars (g), protein (g), fibre (NSP) (g), calcium (mg), iron (mg), zinc (mg), folate (mg), vitamin A (mcg), vitamin C (mg) and sodium (mg). The presence or absence of 8 specific food groups included in the food based standards was also calculated by an experienced nutritionist, based on information provided by trained administrators. These include 5 healthy foods namely; a protein rich food (cheese, meat, fish or legumes), low fat carbohydrate food (bread, rice or pasta), dairy rich food (cheese, yogurt), fruit and vegetable. Three foods restricted in the school meal standards included sweetened drinks, confectionery (cakes and biscuits containing chocolate, chocolate and sugar confectionery and cereal bars) and savoury snacks.

Nutrients and food based standards for the lunch meal were combined to produce a dietary quality score (DQS) for each lunch with a minimum of zero and a maximum score of 21. This score was based on how many nutrient standards each lunch met (out of 13) together with how many healthy foods were included in the lunch (out of 5) and how many restricted foods were not included in the lunch (out of 3). A top score of 21 was obtained if all the nutrient standards were met, all 5 healthy foods were included and none of the restricted foods were included in the child’s lunch.

Statistical analysis

All statistical analyses were carried out using STATA 12.0. The distribution for lunch quality score was checked to ensure a normal distribution before analysis. Multilevel regression modelling was used to take into account the clustering effect of children within schools. Variables showing an extremely skewed
distribution were considered for transformation to the natural logarithm before carrying out statistical 
tests. Model fit was checked by inspecting histograms of the residuals.

Multilevel regression analysis was performed in three steps to identify important nutrient variables 
explaining variability in the DQS in conjunction with foods. Firstly, a Forwards stepwise regression method 
was used beginning with all 8 foods (forced into the model) and adding nutrients into the model one at a 
time until no new nutrients significantly explained variation in lunch quality score. Secondly, individual 
models for each significant nutrient in conjunction with foods were produced in order to identify the most 
important single nutrients contributing to variation in lunch quality. Thirdly, the nutrients most strongly 
associated with lunch quality score were included in the model with all 8 foods. The percent variance 
explained by each model was reported as well as the intraclass correlation (ICC), percent of variation at 
the school level.

Lunches were split into quintiles of nutrients strongly associated with DQS to graphically display change in 
lunch quality score with increased nutrient provision. Changes in score by quintiles of food groups were 
also displayed.

RESULTS

Data on lunch time intake was collected from 1294 children. Of these, 631 (49%) were male and 661 
(51%) were female and 2 children had no information on gender collected. No lunches were excluded 
from the analysis. Mean DQS for all lunches was 10.0 (95% CI 9.7 to 10.2) and had an approximately 
normal distribution. No lunches met all 21 standards. The mean number of nutrient standards met out of 
a total of 13 for each lunch excluding energy was 6.0 (95% CI 5.9 to 6.2) with a median of 6. One lunch 
mets all 13 standards and the lowest number of standards met was 1. The mean number of food based 
standards met out of a total of 8 (5 healthy and 3 restricted) was 4.0 (95% CI 3.8 to 4.1) and a median of 4. 
Thirteen lunches (1%) met all the food based standards while seven lunches did not meet any of the food 
based standards. More details on individual foods and nutrients are published elsewhere. All 
distributions of lunch quality score, food and nutrient based standards were approximately normal and 
therefore none were transformed.

Multiple regression was carried out using DQS as the outcome variable. The full regression model 
revealed that the 13 nutrients and 8 foods explained 74% of the variation in DQS (see table 1). Models 
with only nutrients or only food groups explained lower levels of variation in DQS (see table 1). Forward 
stepwise regression with all food groups in the model excluded 6 nutrients namely: total fat, 
carbohydrate, added sugars, fibre, zinc and vitamin A as these nutrients explained very little of the 
variation in DQS. Seven nutrients remained in the model; these were saturated fat, calcium, iron, vitamin
C, protein, sodium and folate. The regression model with all 8 food groups and the 7 significant nutrients explained 72% of the variation in quality score. The models with each individual nutrient in turn in conjunction with the 8 foods revealed that iron, folate, vitamin C, protein and fibre (NSP) were important individual nutrients in terms of predicting lunch quality in addition to foods.

The three nutrients consistently important in terms of predicting lunch quality both in unadjusted models with food groups only and in the model adjusted for all foods and nutrients were folate, vitamin C and iron which were all associated with a consistent increase in DQS (see figure 1). For example, lunches with the lowest quintile of folate provided in their lunch (1-31ug) on average had a score of less than 8 whereas lunches provided with the highest quintile of folate (75ug or more) on average had a score of more than 12 (out of 21). The model with all 8 foods and these three nutrients explained 70% of the variation in lunch quality score (see table 1). Higher provision of healthy foods such as sandwiches and lower provision of restricted foods increased DQS significantly (see table 2). When the main models were adjusted for energy the R squared values did not change (data not shown).

DISCUSSION

We found that meeting recommended levels of both foods and nutrients are necessary to ensure a high quality packed lunch. However, the use of a large number of nutrient standards in addition to food based standards is not welcomed by schools as has been seen for school meal standards where the nutrient based standards have been replaced with the food based school food plan. To improve policy guidelines these results identify three key nutrients that are useful to incorporate with food based recommendations into policies to encourage good quality packed lunches; namely folate, vitamin C and iron.

These results indicate that for packed lunches, including healthy, and restricting unhealthy, foods adequately ensures that macronutrients such as fats and added sugars are controlled. We found no association with total fat provision and lunch quality and associations for saturated fat were weaker than for other nutrients. Furthermore, added sugars were not associated with lunch quality when foods were included since these are sufficiently limited through restriction of confectionery and drinks. Similar findings have been reported for school meals in the school food plan. However, the addition of nutrient standards to food standards is useful for ensuring a nutritious packed lunch rich in micronutrients. The quality of packed lunches could improve if specific advice is provided on foods rich in folate, vitamin C and iron in addition to the existing food based recommendations. This would include encouraging the following: sandwiches with an iron rich filling such as red meat or beans/lentils, salad with green leaves, citrus fruits and pure fruit juices. Dessert items that are not confectionery are already encouraged by
many schools such as promoting fruit based cakes without chocolate, e.g. apple cake and sweetened bread based items that contain less sugar than cake such as teacakes.

Some nutrients may not have contributed to variation in lunch quality as they are highly correlated with other nutrients. These include correlations between total fat and saturated fat; calcium with protein; zinc and saturated fat; fibre and iron; protein and sodium (data not shown). This may explain why fibre was not as strongly associated with lunch quality as expected. Lower sodium was associated with higher lunch quality, however common sources of sodium are nutritious foods such as meat, fish, bread and cheese and not from salt added to the packed lunch. Therefore reformulation of foods to reduce sodium content is potentially more beneficial than individual advice.

There is little previous research with which to compare our results; a strength of this study. Previous analysis comparing lunches that met only the food based standards and those that met both food and nutrient based standards reported that lunches that met both were more nutritious. Also a strength, was the inclusion of a large representative sample of children from schools across the UK, although the majority are from England. The clustering of children within schools is taken into account in the analysis using a two level model. This research provides an ideal opportunity to build a DQS for food provided at lunch time for children. However, there are limitations to this study. There is no universally agreed measure of dietary quality for children’s lunches and therefore the DQS is not in general use and has not been validated. Indeed a review reported that there are many measures of dietary quality in use in children. Furthermore the DQS is based on levels of nutrients and foods of interest, which is not ideal. The majority of the nutrient standards are for nutrients that are encouraged rather than limited which may bias assessment in favour of healthier components. This analysis only included children who took a packed lunch to school and did not include children having a school meal for comparison. Also, the analysis did not take into account differences in standards by region. Further work is required on school meal data to determine whether similar patterns result. Although representative of 8 to 9 year olds, the information is not necessarily relevant for other age groups. The focus of the analysis is dietary quality of one meal event and not dietary quality over the whole day.

Despite these limitations, the information presented here is useful for school policy makers aiming to improve the quality of packed lunches brought to school. The results from this analysis of packed lunches reveal that including recommendations for a small number of nutrients namely folate, iron and vitamin C in conjunction with the recommendations for foods, both encouraged and restricted, could help improve packed lunch quality. Packed lunch policies are set by schools and therefore individual schools would be responsible for evaluating the success of a policy; training relevant school staff and communicating information to parents via websites or newsletters.
References

19. StataCorp LP (2010) *Stata 11.* 4905 Lakeway Drive, College Station, TX 77845.
Table 1: Percent of variation in dietary quality explained by different regression models with specified foods and nutrients. R squared denotes the overall variation explained by the model. The intra-class-correlation (ICC) denotes the percentage variation at the school level in the 2 level model. The remaining variation is at the individual lunch level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model name</th>
<th>Specific foods and nutrients included in the model</th>
<th>% Variation in dietary quality explained (R²)</th>
<th>ICC (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full model</td>
<td>All 8 food groups and all 13 nutrients</td>
<td>73.7</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foods &amp; significant nutrients</td>
<td>All 8 foods and statistically significant 7 nutrients (protein, vitamin C, iron, calcium, sat fat, sodium, folate)</td>
<td>72.4</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foods only</td>
<td>All 8 food groups and no nutrients</td>
<td>62.4</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutrients only</td>
<td>All 13 nutrients and no foods</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron</td>
<td>Iron and all 8 food groups</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Folate</td>
<td>Folate and all 8 food groups</td>
<td>66.4</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vitamin C</td>
<td>Vitamin C and all 8 food groups</td>
<td>65.6</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fibre (NSP)</td>
<td>Fibre and all 8 food groups</td>
<td>64.9</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protein</td>
<td>Protein and all 8 food groups</td>
<td>64.5</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zinc</td>
<td>Zinc and all 8 food groups</td>
<td>64.3</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carbohydrate</td>
<td>Carbohydrate and all 8 food groups</td>
<td>64.1</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calcium</td>
<td>Calcium and all 8 food groups</td>
<td>63.7</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vitamin A</td>
<td>Vitamin A and all 8 food groups</td>
<td>63.6</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total fat</td>
<td>Total fat and all 8 food groups</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturated fat</td>
<td>Saturated fat and all 8 food groups</td>
<td>62.4</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sodium</td>
<td>Sodium and all 8 food groups</td>
<td>62.4</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NMES</td>
<td>NMES and all 8 food groups</td>
<td>62.4</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food &amp; 3 nutrients</td>
<td>Iron, folate, vitamin C, and all 8 food groups</td>
<td>69.8</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Mean and 95% confidence intervals of dietary quality score out of 21 for each quintile of 6 food groups; sandwich (low fat carbohydrate), fruit, milk dessert, savoury snacks, confectionery (sweet snacks) and sugar sweetened beverages (SSB) in children’s packed lunches. The multilevel model has been taken into account.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food</th>
<th>Quintile 1</th>
<th>Quintile 2</th>
<th>Quintile 3</th>
<th>Quintile 4</th>
<th>Quintile 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean score</td>
<td>95% CI</td>
<td>Mean score</td>
<td>95% CI</td>
<td>Mean score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandwich</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>7.6, 8.4</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>9.0, 9.6</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fruit</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>8.8, 9.2</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>8.8, 9.2</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk dessert</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>9.1, 9.7</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>9.1, 9.7</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Savoury snack</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>10.9, 11.6</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>10.9, 11.6</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confectionery</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>10.9, 11.5</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>10.9, 11.5</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSB</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>10.5, 11.2</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>10.5, 11.2</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1: Mean dietary quality score out of 21 for each quintile of the 4 nutrients: vitamin C, protein, iron and folate, provided in children’s packed lunches which improved dietary quality score in conjunction with food groups.