

Is snacking the new eating norm for New Zealand children? An urgent call for research

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Up-to-date evidence on dietary intake and habits is important for informing policy. However, in recent years there has been a distinct lack of research on children's snacking patterns in New Zealand. The 2002 Children's Nutrition Survey¹ is markedly outdated. The survey did not investigate snacking as a distinct eating occasion, and was therefore unable to assess the relationship between snacking and children's energy intake. Other research related to snacking has been limited to secondary analyses of the 2002 survey data,² a small study (n=44) of five-year-old children³ and comparative analyses of snack foods (eg, nuts).⁴ While we know that most New Zealand children consume 'snacks' (eg, potato chips and candy bars),¹ there is no estimate of the frequency of snacking among children. Moreover, little is known about the context of snacking in children's lives, including sources of snack foods, timing of consumption and behaviours conducive to snacking (eg, screen time). In this research letter, we summarise what is currently known about snacking and outline reasons why more research is needed in this area.

Snacking is most commonly defined as the consumption of foods and drinks between regular meals, although other definitions have been used.⁵ Snacking contributes an important source of energy and nutrients for both children and adults. The health effects of snacking can depend on the type of food consumed and the nature of consumption. On one hand, snacking can provide children with an indispensable source of energy to support growth, learning and physical activity. Consuming healthful snacks (eg, fruit) also provides valuable nutrients and can help support a healthy weight.⁵ Yet, snacking on energy-dense, nutrient-poor (EDNP) foods contributes to poor dietary quality and excess weight gain.⁵

The need for more research on snacking is driven by several changes in recent years that affect food availability for children. Many parents today are more time scarce, which increases their preference for 'convenience food', such as fast food and processed snack foods, many of which are high in salt and sugar.⁶ Serving sizes for fast food, which children often snack on, have also increased.⁷ The global rise of ultra-processed foods also presents concerns. These items account for over half the total dietary intake in UK, US and Canada,⁸ and represent the largest proportion of packaged foods in New Zealand supermarkets.⁹ Moreover, the rise of online grocery shopping, home delivery and exposure to online marketing have drastically transformed the food environment for children. This trend has likely been reinforced by the events of COVID-19. However, the effect of these factors on children's dietary patterns is not clear.

An updated Children's Nutrition Survey is urgently needed to help answer questions about children's eating patterns. However, we argue that additional research is warranted in New Zealand to better understand snacking behaviours. Most importantly, research should investigate the context of snacking in children's lives, including the source of snacks, timing of consumption and prevalence of associated activities (eg, screen use). Such detail can be difficult to obtain using surveys, owing to recall bias and high respondent burden. Suitable methods could use food diaries or wearable cameras paired with recall methods.¹⁰ Such research could help inform policies that both 1) reduce children's opportunities for snacking on energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods and 2) increase consumption of healthier snacks.

Competing interests:

Nil.

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