

School 'Nutrition' Turns to Junk Food on a Plate

Analysis by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#)

✓ Fact Checked

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Lunchables, made by Kraft Heinz, will be available to students at U.S. schools beginning in the 2023 to 2024 school year
- › By securing a regular spot in the lunch line, Kraft Heinz gets a guaranteed boost in profits, but the children receive more ultraprocessed junk food in lieu of real food
- › Kraft Heinz, which has partnered with the School Nutrition Association, appears to have plans to get even more of its products into school lunches, via their KH K-12 Portfolio, which includes pictures of junk food such as CapriSun juice boxes, ranch dressing, pizza and chicken nuggets
- › In the U.K., ultraprocessed foods in primary and secondary schools represent 72.6% and 77.8% of calories, respectively
- › Efforts to improve school lunches are underway, including Eat REAL, a nonprofit group that offers a certification program for schools that commit to using minimally processed, locally sourced ingredients and more

For the first time in history, students will be able to get Kraft Heinz's Lunchables directly from their school at lunchtime — marking a major victory for Kraft and a tragedy for the students who eat them. By securing a regular spot in the lunch line, Kraft Heinz gets a guaranteed boost in profits, but the children receive more ultraprocessed junk food in lieu of real food.

“The politics of school lunch just took a turn for the worse,” Robert Lustig, professor emeritus of pediatrics, division of endocrinology, at UCSF, posted on LinkedIn. “Are you sure you want Kraft Heinz (home of the high-fructose-corn-syrup ketchup) dictating your kid's nutrition?”¹

Lunchables With ‘Improved Nutrition’ Coming to Schools

Lunchables will be available to students at U.S. schools beginning in the 2023 to 2024 school year. Kraft Heinz told CNN Business the highly processed “meals” would be available throughout the U.S. to “all school administrators” to offer to students either for purchase or at no cost via the National School Lunch Program (NSLP).²

To get an idea of the potential scale of this rollout, nearly 30 million children in public and private schools and child care institutions receive lunch from NSLP daily.³ It appears the products had to be reformulated to meet NSLP guidelines, and Kraft Heinz set up a new website dedicated to promoting their Lunchables that are “built for schools.”

The site — Kraft Heinz Away From Home — includes sell sheets and “nutrition” advertisements for its two cafeteria-gearred products — turkey and cheddar cracker stackers and extra cheesy pizza. “Fuel your school with new Lunchables, now available for the 2023-2024 school year!” one ad states.

“They meet the NSLP requirements with 1.5 ounces of meat and 1 ounce of whole grain — and are a good source of protein. They’re always refrigerated and never frozen for great-tasting flavor.”⁴

Kraft Heinz, which has partnered with the School Nutrition Association,⁵ a nonprofit group that represents school food workers, also appears to have plans to get more of its products into school lunches, via their KH K-12 Portfolio. It includes pictures of their processed junk food such as CapriSun juice boxes, ranch dressing, pizza and chicken nuggets.

“Children need nutrients so they can grow, develop and focus on learning instead of thinking about the food they need. Ultimately, they need to be able to concentrate in the

classroom so they can succeed in school and be prepared to enter the workforce as adults,” the Kraft Heinz propaganda reads. “Kraft Heinz recognizes this, and has a vast portfolio that will help meet all of your menu needs whether for breakfast, snack, lunch, supper feeding, or, after school programs.”⁶

Ultraprocessed Foods Dominate School Lunches

U.K. researchers set out to quantify the amount of ultraprocessed food in school meals, noting that “as school meals are publicly funded, they should contain minimal quantities of food products known to be harmful to child health.”⁷ While this seems obvious, the close ties between Big Food and public health agencies ensures that junk food remains front and center in school lunches.

For instance, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (AND),⁸ the U.S. “authority” on food policy, which influences the development of U.S. dietary guidelines, has particularly close ties to the manufacturers of some of the unhealthiest foods you can eat. This includes not only Kraft but also Coca-Cola, PepsiCo and General Mills, among others.⁹

U.S. Right to Know previously revealed a symbiotic relationship between AND, the AND Foundation (ANDF) and such corporations, which assist AND and its foundation with financial contributions. Not surprisingly, AND acts as a pro-industry voice as a result,¹⁰ one that cannot, in this capacity, represent the best interests of public health.

For the U.K. study, researchers found that the ultraprocessed food content of school lunches was high for both primary and secondary schools, representing 72.6% of calories and 77.8% of calories, respectively.¹¹

Packed lunches contained even more ultraprocessed foods, suggesting that parents are relying heavily on junk food when they pack lunch at home. Children in secondary school and those from low-income households were also more likely to have higher intake of ultraprocessed foods.¹²

But not every school lunch program appears as dismal as those in the U.K. and U.S. “In Brazil,” the researchers noted, “a school feeding program in public schools requires that

75% of the food purchased must be minimally processed and 30% must be supplied from local sources. Evidence indicates that this policy is associated with a lower intake of UPF foods, better diet quality and lower obesity.”¹³

Why Ultraprocessed Foods Don't Belong at School

Ultraprocessed foods are among the worst things you can eat, and children, in particular, may be sabotaging their future health by consuming them. In the U.S. and the U.K., more than half of daily caloric intake comes from these junk foods.¹⁴ What exactly are ultraprocessed foods (UPFs)? Imperial College London researchers defined them as:¹⁵

“... foods that are industrial formulations made by assembling industrially-derived food substances and food additives through a sequence of extensive industrial processes. UPFs contain little or no whole foods and are often energy dense, high in salt, sugar and fat, low in fiber, and liable to overconsumption.

They are aggressively marketed with strong brands to promote consumption and are gradually displacing traditional dietary patterns based on fresh and minimally processed food.”

Consuming heavily processed junk food takes a toll on your whole body, including your brain. Research published in JAMA Neurology demonstrated that consuming UPFs such as breakfast cereal, frozen foods and soda could lead to cognitive decline and increase your risk of Alzheimer's disease.¹⁶

UPFs are also linked to early death. One study estimated that if ultraprocessed foods made up less than 23% of adults' daily calories, about 20,000 premature deaths could be prevented each year.¹⁷ Yet, among Americans, ultraprocessed foods make up about 57% of daily calories, on average.¹⁸

Children's Mental Health May Suffer

Mental health is also affected by diet. Higher levels of sodium in the urine can be an indication of a diet high in sodium, such as ultraprocessed foods and salty snacks. A low level of potassium, meanwhile, is indicative of a diet lacking in fruits, vegetables and other healthy potassium-rich foods.

In a study on teens, higher sodium and lower potassium excretion rates were associated with more frequent symptoms of depression at follow up 1.5 years later.¹⁹

“Given the substantial brain development that occurs during adolescence, individuals in this developmental period may be particularly vulnerable to the effects of diet on the neural mechanisms underlying emotion regulation and depression,” researchers at the University of Alabama at Birmingham wrote.²⁰

In addition, poor diet could influence depression by disturbing the gut microbiome, which could further influence brain function.²¹ Past studies have also confirmed the diet-depression link among children and teens. When researchers systematically reviewed 12 studies involving children and adolescents, an association was revealed between unhealthy diet and poorer mental health, as well as between a good-quality diet and better mental health.²²

The consumption of junk food has also been associated with psychiatric distress and violent behaviors in children and adolescents, which includes worry, depression, confusion, insomnia, anxiety, aggression and worthless feelings, as well as physical fighting, being a victim and bullying.²³

Eating Real Food Makes a Difference

Lustig is chief scientific officer of Eat REAL, a nonprofit group founded in 2012 that’s raising awareness of the value of real food in schools. With a team of experts in health, nutrition, education, the food system and more, Eat REAL has brought its Eat REAL Certification to more than 500 partners across the U.S.²⁴

“Everyone, check out Eat REAL (full disclosure, I’m chief science officer). Real food increases cognition. Real food reduces irritability. Real food reduces violence. Call your

congressman. Get Kraft Heinz out of your kid's school," Lustig says.²⁵ The program aims to improve children's health with the simple solution of offering real food. According to Eat REAL:²⁶

"Today, kids aren't eating enough real foods, hurting them and our planet. Food related disease is the #1 cause of early death globally ... Unhealthy and highly processed food is putting our kids' lifespans and healthspans at risk."

The Eat REAL Certification involves 10 standards that are modeled after the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) green building certification program. They include the following:²⁷

- Encourages cooking from scratch using whole or minimally processed ingredients
- Discourages consumption of added sugars
- Encourages consumption of unadulterated fresh fruits and vegetables
- Encourages sustainable produce sourcing and the use of seasonal ingredients
- Encourages sourcing of ingredients to maximize animal welfare

According to EatReal's 2021 Impact Report, they've improved 70 million meals annually, positively influencing 213,000 students.²⁸

"Our core program, Eat REAL Certification, continues to have a waitlist. The program has proven its ability to support school leaders to make their food programs more delicious, culturally relevant, healthy, and sustainable."

Will the USDA's Proposed Improvements Help?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has proposed new nutrition standards for school meals, which include some positive moves in the right direction, particularly in their recommendation to limit added sugars.²⁹

However, the proposed changes fall far short of what's needed to protect children's health. A more significant overhaul would take steps to eliminate ultraprocessed foods

from school lunches — a necessary step to reduce the intake of toxic industrially processed seed oils, often referred to as “vegetable oils.”

These oils are high in linoleic acid that, when consumed in excess, triggers a catastrophic cascade of health declines rooted in mitochondrial dysfunction and insulin resistance. The requirement to include less than 10% of calories from saturated fat³⁰ is also harmful to children, who need healthy animal fats in their diet. The guidelines are such that whole milk is not allowed in schools but fat-free chocolate milk is.

Other simple interventions to bring more real food to school cafeterias should also be explored, like school gardens. The Garden to Cafeteria program is one such option, which teaches students how to grow food, which is then used in salad bars in school cafeterias.

In Denver, this program has been in place for years, resulting in more than 5,000 pounds of produce that have been enjoyed by students in about 250 schools.³¹ Such programs can even be self-sustaining, with proceeds going back to support the program, and can be implemented throughout the U.S.

In the immediacy, if you have the resources, send your children to school with a lunch made from real food. If they'll be eating a school-provided lunch, teach them how to choose the least processed options available, avoiding ultraprocessed junk food like Kraft Heinz's Lunchables.

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