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Study shows skipping lunch common among children, especially young girls

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According to new analysis of data from the 2009-2012 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) that evaluated eating patterns of 3,647 children ages 4-13 years, skipping lunch is a common practice among children and adolescents, with 13% of younger children and 17% of 9-13 year olds skipping lunch on a given day.

The study found that the behavior persisted throughout the week with nearly a quarter (approximately 23%) of 9-13 year olds skipping lunch on the weekends. These findings, part of Nestlé's new Kids Nutrition & Health Study (KNHS), were presented at a poster session entitled "What Happened to Lunch? Dietary Intakes of 4-13 Year Old Lunch Consumers and Non-Consumers in the United States" at the American Society of Nutrition conference.

These findings are of particular concern given that lunch skippers had lower intakes of nutrients, including calcium and fiber, than lunch consumers. In addition, the data show that for some children, the lunch meal was primarily responsible for the higher essential nutrient intakes of vitamin D, potassium and magnesium, as well as a nutrient of concern, sodium.

"We were concerned to see lunch skipping happening all week long and even more so on the weekends, with the largest group of skippers being girls 9-13 years of age. Lunch skippers are missing out on some key nutrients essential for growth and development," said the lead author of the study, Dr Kevin Mathias, and Scientist at the Nestlé Research Center. "This study highlights an opportunity for both government and the food industry to develop new strategies to encourage children and adolescents to consume a healthy lunch."

The new data is part of Nestlé's KNHS, research initiated in 2012 that builds on ten years of comprehensive infant and toddler nutrition research in the Feeding Infants and Toddlers Study (FITS). These studies form a consolidated body of research that provides snapshots of eating patterns, nutrient intakes, child lifestyle and behavioral factors, and healthy weight indicators of children ages 0-12, a period thought to be the critical habit-forming years that will impact health throughout the life course.

By the end of 2016, Nestlé’s KNHS and FITS research will be underway in ten countries including the United States, China and Mexico. Over time, these ongoing studies will provide important country-specific and global information on infant and child nutrition to inform solutions that address their nutritional needs. This information will be shared in scientific forums over several years to help inform public health communities around the world.

Nestlé has utilized findings from FITS to improve products to help address unmet nutritional needs of infants and toddlers, such as adjusting the composition of Gerber Graduates meals to address a lack of fruits and vegetables in the diet.

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