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The impact of providing a healthy school lunch at Dutch primary schools on dietary intake and appreciation

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Background: Since there is a shift at primary schools in eating lunch at home to eating lunch at school, providing a healthy school lunch may be an opportunity to improve dietary intake of Dutch primary school children.

Purpose: To stimulate dietary intake of Dutch primary school children by offering a healthy school lunch based on the Dutch dietary guidelines.

Methods: Three Dutch primary schools received a healthy school lunch for a 6-month period. Lunch consumption data was collected at baseline, at 3- and at 6-months by the use of photos of the lunch. At 6-months, potential compensation effects were measured with a single brief questionnaire among parents at the three intervention and three comparison schools.

Results: Total 250 children participated in the study (58% female, mean age 10.1 years, SD: 1.3). Preliminary results show that 7% of the children consumed vegetables at lunch at baseline, which increased to 51% and 48% at 3-months and 6-months respectively. Parents (n=291) indicated that children with a healthy school lunch consumed more snack vegetables (29%) during lunch and consumed less sweet snacks (7%) outside school hours than children without a healthy school lunch (23% and 19%).

Conclusion: This study showed that introducing a healthy school improved the dietary intake of primary school children, especially with regards to vegetables. Since primary schools are home to children from all socioeconomic backgrounds, improving their dietary intake will consequently decrease socioeconomic inequalities in dietary intake.