

Media release

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AFTER SCHOOL SNACKS A WEIGHTY ISSUE

Many Australian children are eating highly processed, nutrient-poor snack food after school, reveals new CSIRO Preventative Health Flagship report, commissioned by Unilever Australia.

Published yesterday at the Dietitians Association of Australia's National Conference, the report¹ presents the first data available on what Australian children aged 5 to 8 years are eating in the 'after school' period (school days between 3:00pm and 5:00pm).

Dr Manny Noakes, who was responsible for the analysis of the CSIRO research, said: "There have been few studies that look at the dietary intake of children both during and after school hours in Australia, and this is certainly the most detailed research observing children's eating habits in the after-school period."

The research shows that almost half (46 per cent) of all children surveyed consume biscuits, cakes and pastries after school. 'Confectionery and cereal bars' are consumed by 17 per cent of children, with the majority of these foods being chocolate or other sweets (i.e. lollies).

The CSIRO reported that, on average, children aged 5 to 8 years consume one-sixth of their total day's energy, approximately 1,300kJ, during the after-school period. Carbohydrate contributes to 57 per cent of energy intake during this period (60 per cent of which is sugars), whilst 30 per cent of energy is provided by fat (nearly half of this is saturated fat).

Commenting on the findings, leading paediatric dietitian, Susie Burrell, said: "For some time we have believed that the after school period was a major danger time when it comes to children overeating non-nutritious, snack foods and this data confirms our beliefs. What's also particularly concerning is the amount of saturated fats kids are consuming during this period.

"Highly processed, carbohydrate-based foods are significant contributors of empty kilojoules, saturated fat and high GI carbohydrates. They don't offer the nutritional benefits of other key nutrients that children need, including calcium, protein and fibre. These foods may also leave kids vulnerable to energy fluctuations and overeating," said Ms Burrell. "Given that 1 in 4 Australian children are overweight or obese, it is time for the after school period to be looked at as a key time for good nutrition in childhood."

The research also identifies that the majority of children consume after-school foods at home (66 per cent). Institutions (ie. school or after-school care) were the second most common location (13

¹ *Secondary Analysis of the 2007 Australian National Children's Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey (ANCPAS)*

per cent), followed closely by 'any other residence' (11 per cent) such as at a friend or relative's house.

Ms Burrell has the following snacking advice for parents: "A nutritionally-balanced snack food for children should be 'nutrient dense' and offer a number of key nutritional benefits rather than solely acting as a source of energy.

"In general, protein-based foods such as yoghurt, other milk-based snacks as well as fresh fruit meet a number of nutritional requirements for growing children. A range of child friendly options are available including reduced fat dairy desserts, low fat ice cream, flavoured milk and yoghurt – all foods kids love but with some nutritional benefits as well.

"Of all the data we have available on weight control long term, it appears that low GI diets may be beneficial. For this reason, snack foods for children should also be low GI where possible"

Unilever Australia commissioned the research as part of its long term strategy to deliver products that are nutritionally responsible.

Megan Cobcroft, Unilever nutritionist, said: "Unilever has been working to improve the nutrition profile of its products, such as Streets Paddle Pop, to meet strict school canteen requirements, Unilever's own nutrition guidelines, and to provide nutritious snacking options for children.

"This research will be a valuable tool for Unilever, nutritionists and parents alike."

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Notes

The *2007 Australian National Children's Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey* was jointly funded by the Australian Government (through the Department of Health and Ageing, and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry) and the Australian Food and Grocery Council.

The main findings of the *2007 ANCNPAS* were officially released by the Department of Health and Ageing on 3rd October 2008.

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