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How healthy are children's menus on the island of Ireland?

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Out-of-home (OH) eating has been identified as one of the many contributing factors to the development of obesity⁽¹⁾. It has been reported that 77% of Irish children ate OH at least once a week and this contributed 10% of energy intakes⁽²⁾. Although, the current literature has demonstrated that the majority of children's menus are of low nutritional quality^(3–5), there are no comparable data for the island of Ireland. Therefore, the aim of this study was to assess children's menus on the island of Ireland by scoring the availability of healthier menu choices.

Children's menus (*n*106) from a range of establishment types (cafes/sandwich shops, fast food establishments, restaurants and pubs) across the island of Ireland were scored. The scoring criteria were based on the children's menu section of the Northern Ireland Nutrition Catering Award⁽⁶⁾. Questions included the availability of half portions and healthier menu items e.g. fruit, yogurt, milk, water. Menus were awarded scores based on not meeting, partially meeting and fully meeting the criteria out of a possible, maximum score of 15. A Fisher's Exact Test was used to explore the association of scores between establishment type and a one way ANOVA with a permutation test identified any significant differences between establishment total scores.

In general, all four types of establishments scored low for the provision of healthier options (mean/15 (SD)); (4 (3.1), range 0–14): Cafes/sandwich shops (5.3 (3.0)) > Restaurants (4.5 (3.3)) > Pubs (4.5 (2.8)) > Fast food (1.8 (2.1)). The total score for fast food establishments was significantly lower than cafes/sandwich shops and pubs (*P* = 0.001). Although the majority of establishments did not fully meet all of the criteria, some establishments were more likely to provide an alternative to deep fried potatoes but least likely to provide both fruit and yogurt (Table). Fast food establishments were least likely to meet the criteria except for provision of milk and water (Table).

Table. Percentage of establishments fully meeting each criterion.

Criteria	All establishments (<i>n</i> 106; %)	Cafe (<i>n</i> 10; %)	Fast food (<i>n</i> 24; %)	Restaurant (<i>n</i> 49; %)	Pub (<i>n</i> 23; %)	<i>p</i> -value ^a
Are at least 50% of meals healthy?	22	50	0	29	17	<0.001
Is there a vegetable apart from beans?	13	10	0	10	4	0.047
Are fruit & yogurt available?	2	10	0	2	0	0.006
Are milk & water available?	16	0	25	4	39	0.004
Is there an alternative to deep fried potatoes?	25	10	4	16	26	0.003
Are there half portions of adult menu?	13	10	0	8	13	0.063

^aA Fisher's Exact Test identified any associations between establishment type scores for each criterion.

This research has revealed children's menus on the island of Ireland were limited in both menu choice and nutritional quality. Small changes such as providing vegetables, milk, water, fruit and yogurts as standard menu items could improve the nutritional value of OH food served to children.

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