

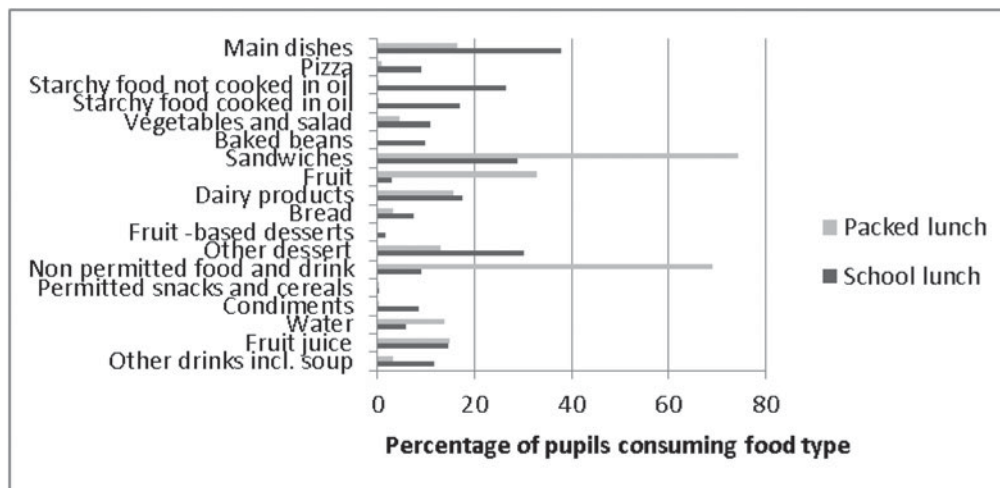
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The advantages to pupils in English secondary schools of having a school lunch rather than a packed lunch

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Secondary school pupils have a variety of options for food intake at lunchtime, with 37.6% of pupils opting for a school lunch in 2010–11⁽¹⁾. The majority of the remainder had a packed lunch or went off site. Since 2009, food served in English schools has been required by law to conform to food-based and nutrition-based standards⁽²⁾, but these standards do not apply to packed lunches. The School Food Trust conducted a study in which the school lunches served in a nationally representative sample of 80 English secondary schools were compared with packed lunches. Fieldwork was conducted over the lunchtime period on five consecutive days at each school between October 2010 and April 2011. Each day, trained fieldworkers randomly selected five packed lunch pupils and fifteen school lunch pupils and observed, weighed and recorded their lunch items and leftovers. The differences in the type of food selected reflected typical differences between hot and cold meals, such as a higher sandwich consumption, lower main dish and lower starchy food consumption by pupils having a packed lunch compared with those eating a school lunch. Pupils having a packed lunch were far more likely to have fruit compared with those taking school lunches (34% cf. 3%). Although, pupils taking a school lunch had a higher overall fruit and vegetable consumption compared with pupils who had a packed lunch (0.8 cf. 0.6 portions), in the school lunches this was mainly as vegetables, salad and fruit juice, whereas in packed lunches it was mainly fruit. Items not permitted under the food-based standards were commonly eaten by packed lunch pupils with 37% having non-permitted snacks (e.g. crisps), 26% drinking non-permitted drinks (e.g. drinks high in sugar) and 40% having at least one item of confectionery or cakes/biscuits containing confectionery.



Nutritional analysis suggested that an average school lunch has a better nutrient profile than an average packed lunch, although neither meal type provided pupils with the optimum nutrient intake at lunch time. In particular, school lunches had a higher energy, protein, carbohydrate, fibre, folate, vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium, iron and zinc content and a lower sodium content. Pupils should therefore be encouraged to have school lunches rather than opting for packed lunches. This would ensure that they have access to a range of healthy food and drink items, helping them to choose and consume more nutrient dense meals at lunchtime. However, as long as pupils continue to bring packed lunches, it is important that schools are helped to develop appropriate policies consistent with wider Government strategies for healthy living⁽³⁾.

1. The School Food Trust (2011) Sixth annual survey of take up of school lunches in England. <http://www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk/school-cooks-caterers/reports/sixth-annual-survey-of-take-up-of-school-meals-in-england>
2. School Food Trust. A guide to introducing the Government's food-based and nutrient-based standards for school lunches. <http://www.schoolfoodtrust.org.uk/resources/nutrientbasedstandards>
3. HM Government (2008) Healthy weight, Healthy lives; a Cross-Government Strategy for England. [ARCHIVED CONTENT] Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives A Cross Government Strategy for England: Department of Health - Publications (accessed 24th February 2012).