

What factors are associated with frequent unhealthy snack-food consumption among Australian secondary-school students?

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Abstract

Objective: To examine demographic and behavioural correlates of unhealthy snack-food consumption among Australian secondary-school students and the association between their perceptions of availability, convenience and intake with consumption.

Design: Cross-sectional survey of students' eating, physical activity and sedentary behaviours using validated instruments administered via an online questionnaire.

Setting: Australian secondary schools across all states/territories.

Subjects: Secondary-school students aged 12–17 years participating in the 2009–10 National Secondary Students' Diet and Activity (NaSSDA) survey (*n* 12 188).

Results: Approximately one in five students (21 %) reported consuming unhealthy snack foods ≥ 14 times/week ('frequent snackers'). After adjusting for all covariates, older students and those with a BMI of ≥ 25 kg/m² were less likely to be frequent snackers, while students who reported high fast-food and high sugar-sweetened beverage consumption and those who watched television for >2 h/d were more likely to snack frequently. Furthermore, after adjusting for all covariates and demographic factors, students who agreed that snack foods are usually available at home, convenient to buy and that they eat too many snack foods were more likely to be snacking frequently. Conversely, students who agreed that fruit is a convenient snack were less likely to be frequent snackers.

Conclusions: Frequent unhealthy snack-food consumption appears to cluster with other poor health behaviours. Perceptions of availability and convenience are factors most readily amenable to change, and findings suggest interventions should focus on decreasing the availability of unhealthy snack foods in the home and promoting healthier options such as fruit as convenient snacks.

Keywords
Snack food
Adolescents
Demographic
Australia

Snack foods are generally energy-dense and nutrient-poor and are commonly consumed by adolescents, especially in their leisure time⁽¹⁾. Ninety per cent of Australian secondary-school students report consuming extra or non-essential foods on a daily basis, with energy-dense snacks comprising the greatest proportion of the extra foods consumed⁽²⁾. Research suggests that intake of extra foods and an energy-dense diet may displace the consumption of core foods such as fruit and vegetables^(3,4), and energy-dense, high-fat diets have been

identified as risk factors in the development of obesity during childhood and adolescence⁽⁵⁾.

Despite the health risks associated with frequent consumption of unhealthy snack foods, literature assessing the demographic and behavioural correlates of adolescent snacking is limited. Given that studies use different definitions of snack foods, it is difficult to determine just how frequent snacking is for this age group^(6,7). Some studies define snack foods as anything consumed between main meals (core or non-core food items), while other studies focus on individual snack-food items or only on snacks consumed at a specific time of day. Snacking habits in relation to frequency, size and energy content of snacks also differ across countries⁽⁸⁾, making it difficult

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