

Are we neglecting our boys' diets?

With the amount of food that adolescent boys can eat, who would have thought that they would have a shortage of any food group! But although they may have hefty appetites, based on their eating habits, they are coming up short-changed. Their unhealthy eating habits have them on a trajectory to obesity and chronic diseases such as diabetes and heart disease.

Health Canada analyzed data¹ from 24-hour dietary recalls for 2,288 males, ages 14-18, in 2004 which revealed the following stark facts:

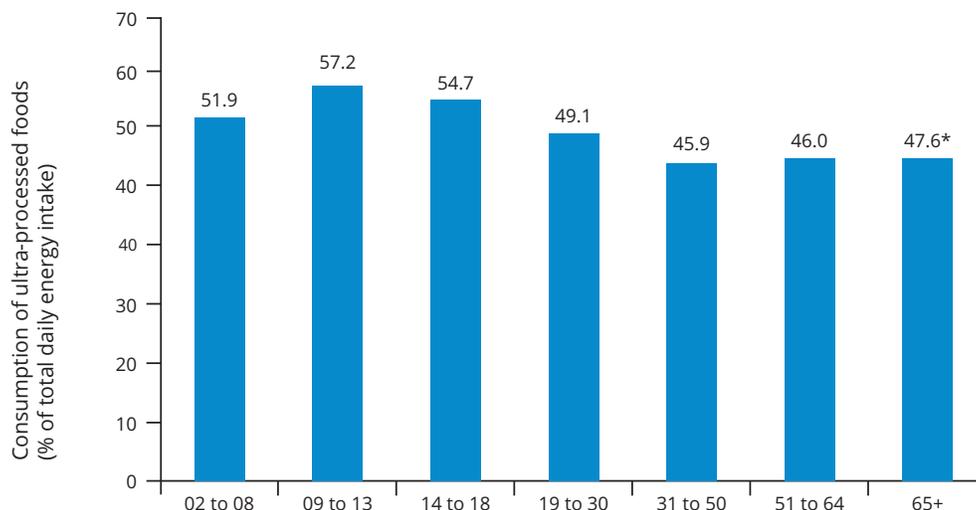
- 86% are not eating the CFG (Canada's Food Guide) recommended intake of 8 servings of vegetables and fruit a day
- 56% are not eating the CFG recommended intake of 3 servings of milk products and alternatives a day
- 57% are not eating the CFG recommended intake of 3 servings of meat and alternatives a day
- 47% consumed **two or more** Food Guide servings **above the recommended amount** (7 servings) of grain products.

These stats leads one to hypothesize that teen boys are having a lot of pop, pizza and snack food.

Over a decade later, in 2015, Health Canada commissioned another 24-hour dietary recall survey. Using the data gathered, Heart and Stroke² did an analysis using a new method – the NOVA system – to classify what these young people ate according to the amount of processing. At one end of the spectrum are unprocessed or minimally processed foods which includes vegetables, fruits, grains, meats, fish, eggs, legumes, and milk. They are considered the foundational foods for healthy dishes and meals. At the opposite end of the spectrum are ultra-processed foods which include fast food, sugary drinks, snacks, chips, candies, cookies, sweetened milk products, sweetened cereals, and sauce and dressings. They are nutritionally poor.

The results are alarming. Over half the calories our young people are eating come from energy-dense, nutritionally-lacking foods and beverages. Children between 9 and 13 years of age fared the worst - a whopping 57% of their daily energy coming from what many people label as junk food. And that's a typical day. It is every day on average, not just a one-off special occasion.

Mean consumption of ultra-processed (% of total daily energy intake) according to age groups, Canadian population 2 years and older, 2015



Data Source: Statistics Canada: CCHS Nutrition (2015)- FID file

*Significant linear trend across all age groups (p<0.0001) using general linear models

Not unexpectedly, as the dietary share of ultra-processed foods increased, the dietary share of unprocessed or minimally processed foods significantly decreased. For example, energy from meat and poultry dropped from 12.7% to 2.5% and fruits from 9.5% to 2.4%. Meals prepared with whole foods - vegetables, fruit, whole grains, meats, poultry, fish, eggs, legumes, nuts and seeds – are being replaced with ready-to-eat meals that are ordered at a quick-serve restaurant or come out of a box or cellophane wrap.

Perhaps it's not surprising that 31% of children and youth (5-17 years) were classified as overweight or obese³.

Adolescence is a period of rapid growth and development. Teen boys have a high calorie need to support their growing bodies so they seem to be constantly hungry and need lots of sleep. Their typical sleep pattern often has them missing breakfast resulting in being ravenous mid-morning. Then, the convenience of fast food, sweetened breakfast cereals and sugary, salty, fatty snacks is hard to resist.

As parents and society as a whole, we need to provide access to wholesome foods and teach cooking skills so our youth can provide themselves with the nourishment required to build better bodies.

One simple solution is to be sure that you provide healthy foods in the most accessible way. Although it may sound crazy – simply washing the grapes and setting them on the table can make grapes the snack-choice over the potato chip! Try the experiment and report back!

¹Evidence Review for Dietary Guidance Technical Report, 2015, Health Canada

²Ultra-processed foods in Canada: consumption, impact on diet quality and policy implications, December 2017, Heart and Stroke

³Canadian Health Measures Survey: Household and physical measures data, 2012 to 2013. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/141029/dq141029c-eng.htm>