

An apple (or banana) a day...

A national scheme to give fruit to primary school children is an effective way of improving their diet, a University of Nottingham study has found.

Researchers studying the National Schools Fruit Scheme (NSFS) found that it brought about a marked increase in the amount of fruit eaten by young children — on average almost doubling their weekly intake of apples, pears, bananas and satsumas.

The government announced the NSFS in 2002 in a bid to provide every child in their first three years of primary school a free piece of fruit each day.

Efforts to increase fruit intake in young children have been a priority in recent years, particularly in the light of surveys which suggest that 30 per cent of young children typically eat apples or pears less than once a week. For citrus fruit this figure rises to 70 per cent.

The NSFS programme was phased in gradually across England on a region-by-region basis. University of Nottingham researchers compared children who lived in the East Midlands — where it was introduced early on — with those living in the East of England region, where it was implemented later.

Between 2003-2005 they looked at more than 200 primary schools, studying the fruit intake of more than 5,000 children before, during and after taking part in the scheme. The children were in their reception year, ie aged four or five, at the beginning of the study in 2003.

Fruit intake was quantified by two questions asking parents how many days in a typical week the child ate fruit, either at school or at home, and how many pieces of fruit were consumed on average every day.

Their study, published in the International Journal of Epidemiology and funded by the Department of Health, demonstrates that school-based schemes to distribute fruit are an effective way of increasing overall dietary fruit intake in young children.

On average, their weekly intake almost doubled – rising from an average of 7.5 pieces of fruit a week to 14 pieces a week during the scheme.

The number of children who ate fruit every day as a result of being on the scheme rose from around 46 per cent to around 65 per cent.

The daily cost of the scheme was estimated by the Department of Health to be around 10pence per child, equating to an annual cost of £20 per child.

However it also found that this approach does not influence fruit intake after the provision of free fruit ends — suggesting that schemes may need to be sustained throughout primary school to provide the maximum benefit to young children and achieve a consistent change in their diet.

Dr Andrew Fogarty, of the University's Division of Epidemiology and Public Health, said: “A diet rich in fruit is widely acknowledged to be beneficial to health, particularly with regard to the risk of cardiovascular disease and cancer in adults, and the risk of asthma in children.

“It's also likely that patterns of dietary intake of fruits and other healthy foods are established early in life.

“So it's very important to develop interventions that increase regular fruit intake in young children, especially those from less affluent sectors of society, as diet may be one lifestyle factor contributing towards socio-economic differentials in health.”

Source: University of Nottingham

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