

Keeping your health and wellbeing in the know

MyHealthTALK

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School Junk Food Restrictions May Make Kids Healthier

A new study finds that students at schools with tougher junk food laws are more likely to have healthier body weights. Schools in states restricting junk food in vending machines, the cafeteria and student stores have students gaining less weight than those at schools without such rules.

Dr. Daniel Taber, a postdoctoral research associate at the University of Illinois at Chicago, studied health and weight data from 6,300 students in 40 states. Body mass index (or BMI, measuring weight relative to height) was recorded for students in fifth grade and then in eighth grade. Students attending schools restricting junk food in fifth grade gained an average 0.25 fewer BMI units in three years than students in schools without junk food laws.



In recent years, more states have passed laws regulating food in schools. In 1979, a federal standard passed that prevents schools from selling items such as gum and candy in the cafeteria during lunch.

If you are a parent with children in schools and/or states that do not have tough laws against junk food, you may have some options. School districts participating in the federal school food program are required to establish a wellness policy committee. Parents can ask to serve on this committee.

“We have found that kids eat less junk food when there is less junk food in schools,” said Dr. Marlene Schwartz, deputy director of the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University. “This is the first big national study that looked at the laws.”

Lying Less Linked to Better Health

It turns out that your mother was right all along. You should not tell a lie. Now, a group of psychologists at the University of Notre Dame is reinforcing your mom’s advice. Researcher Anita Kelly, PhD, professor of psychology, reports that people who lie less have better relationships and fewer health complaints.

The “Science of Honesty” study involved 110 participants. Half were told to stop telling major and minor lies for the 10-week duration of the study. The other half were instructed to notice the number of lies they told each week.

Polygraph tests measuring lies, health and relationship issues were performed weekly on both groups. Results showed the link between fewer lies and better health was significant in the truthful group. When participants from both groups lied less in a week, they reported significantly better physical and mental health. “We found that the participants could purposefully and dramatically reduce their everyday lies, and that in turn was associated with significantly improved health,” says Kelly.

Personal relationships also benefit from truthfulness, the study showed. Kelly said, “What we are suggesting is, not violating others’ expectation of honesty is likely to build trust, which may be key to good health through improving our relationships.”

The study was funded by the John Templeton Foundation.

West Nile Threat Grows

Watch out for those pesky mosquitos! Never have the irritating bugs given so many Americans the West Nile virus so early in the year. In fact, this summer's West Nile outbreak may end up being the worst in U.S. history. In August, public health officials reported 41 deaths and 1,120 cases of West Nile, compared to 300 in an average year. Nearly half of the reported cases, 629, involved serious neuroinvasive diseases. West Nile—transmitted when mosquitos bite infected birds and then bite us—can cause inflammation of the brain (meningitis and encephalitis), paralysis, West Nile fever and nervous system illnesses.

Fortunately, only 1 percent of the 200 or so species of mosquitos in the U.S. carry West Nile, and only 1 percent of those bitten by infected mosquitos will get seriously ill. Nearly 80 percent of those infected will have no symptoms. The remaining 9 percent have mild, flu-like symptoms including fever, headache, nausea, fatigue, weakness, confusion, body aches, joint pain, dizziness, sensitivity to light, diarrhea and/or rash.

Still, West Nile has sent hundreds of people to the hospital this year, taking lives and leaving some people with neurological damage that could last for months or a lifetime. Children and the elderly have higher risks for getting and fighting off the virus. Currently, there are no medicines or vaccines to treat it.



Health officials and scientists are trying to figure out why West Nile cases are escalating this year. For one thing, a mild winter, wet spring and hot summer created the ideal breeding ground for mosquitos. Heat speeds up the life cycle for mosquitos and the virus. There is also a newcomer among mosquitos in the U.S., the disease-prone Asian Tiger mosquito, which may be contributing to the rise of West Nile. Additionally, scientists are investigating whether the virus has mutated.

To reduce chances of getting bitten, wear long sleeves and long pants at dawn and dusk, use repellent with DEET, consume garlic or garlic supplements (not odorless), and empty standing water around your house.

Officials said this year's outbreak would worsen since most West Nile cases are not reported until August or September.