

## **School Lunch Debit Cards are Associated with Lower Nutrition and Higher Calories**

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### **Abstract**

*Purpose:* To examine how the common use of cashless or debit systems in lunchrooms relates to the healthfulness and quantity of food purchased by US public school students.

*Methods:* The School Nutrition Dietary Assessment (SNDA-III) is a national survey of 2,314 students in grades 1-12 across 287 schools over a span of 4 ½ months. This survey provides information on the purchase system employed by the school as well as the individual purchases and consumption of the student. We compare schools that allow both cash and debit purchases to those that allow only debit card purchases.

*Results:* Students in schools allowing both cash and debit purchase more fresh fruit (47% versus 31%,  $P<.01$ ) and fresh vegetables (31% versus 11%  $P<.01$ ), and they consume fewer total calories (538 versus 578  $P=.03$ ).

*Conclusions:* Cashless purchase systems were related to higher calories and poorer nutrition in school lunchroom choices. This may be due to the relative freedom provided to students under a cashless system. Parents may place enough money in the account to pay for months of meals, making it difficult in many cases to track the flow of money out of the account. This added freedom could lead adolescents to increase their consumption of food. Cashless systems could be easily redesigned to allow for stronger parental controls on spending.

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