

Healthy Convenience: Nudging Students Toward Healthier Choices in the Lunchroom

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Abstract

Background: In the context of food, convenience is generally associated with less healthy foods. Given the reality of present-biased preferences, if convenience was associated with healthier foods and less healthy foods were less convenient, people would likely consume healthier foods. This study examines the application of this principle in a school lunchroom where healthier foods were made more convenient relative to less healthy foods.

Methods: One of two lunch lines in a cafeteria was arranged so as to display only healthier foods and flavored milk. Trained field researchers collected purchase and consumption data before and after the conversion. Mean comparisons were used to identify differences in selection and consumption of healthier foods, less healthy foods, and chocolate milk.

Results: Sales of healthier foods increased by 18% and grams of less healthy foods consumed decreased by nearly 28%. Also, healthier foods' share of total consumption increased from 33% to 36%. Lastly, we find that students increased their consumption of flavored milk, but the share of flavored milk consumed to total consumption did not increase.

Conclusions: In a school lunchroom, a convenience line that offered only healthier food options nudged students to consume fewer unhealthy foods. This result has key implications for encouraging healthy behavior in public schools nation wide, cafeterias, and other food establishments.

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The authors recognize the U.S. Department of Agriculture - ERS/FNS for their support.

Forthcoming in the *Journal of Public Health*