

SCIENCE & WELLNESS

Your Kid's Lunch and Recess Schedule Matters More Than You Think

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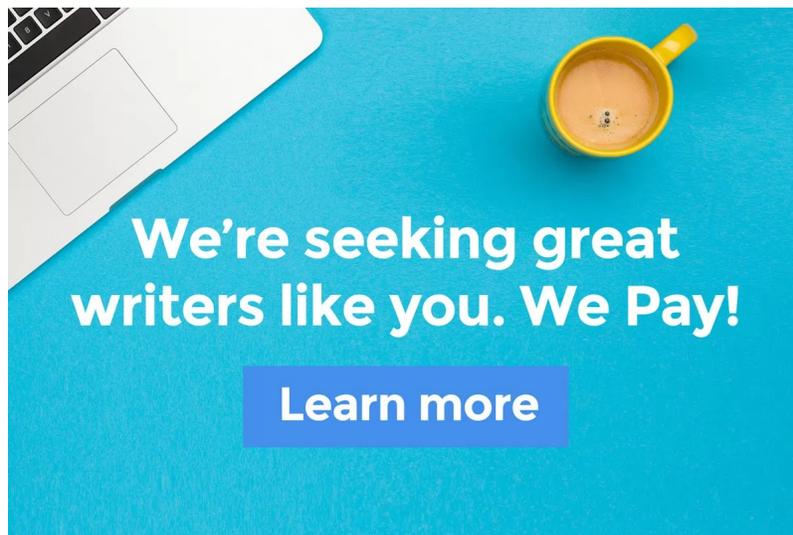
POSTED ON
May 1, 2017 (May 1, 2017)



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The timing and length of your children’s lunch and recess during school can affect their food and exercise habits, according to a new [study](#) from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Most research up until now has focused on nutritional intake or physical activity during recess separately, but this is the first study to measure how they are interrelated. This study helps to shed some light on the influence of lunch scheduling on both physical activity during recess and food choices made by children at lunchtime.

For a span of five days, researchers assessed the physical activity and lunch food choices of 151 fourth and fifth grade students from two low-income schools. Their lunch intake was measured using a weighted plate waste technique captured by digital photography. Their physical activity during recess was measured using accelerometry, a tool that evaluates movement. Each school scheduled lunch either just before or immediately after recess.



The researchers found that:

- Although less food was wasted when recess was held before lunch, children ate more vegetables when lunch was offered before recess.
- When children had a longer time for a combined lunch and recess period, they were proportionally more physically active when lunch was offered before recess.
- When the lunch-recess period was shorter, children were more active when recess was offered before lunch.

Overall, these findings suggest that recess and lunch behaviors are connected. The relationship between food consumption and physical activity were independent of factors previously shown to contribute to recess activity such as a child's weight status and gender.

Why is this important?

Childhood obesity continues to be a problem in the United States for many reasons, including decreased opportunities for physical activity and unhealthy food choices. Since children spend the majority of their day at school, it is critical that schools promote healthy eating and physical activity behaviors. In order to do this, schools need scientific evidence to determine student policies, such as when and how much time to allow for lunch and recess during the school day.

The current guidelines from the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) recommend scheduling recess before lunch to reduce overall food waste. The findings from this new study, however, indicate that these recommendations may need to be adjusted. A study like this new one can be used to inform school policymaking to ensure that the students reap the most benefits possible.

According to [guidelines](#) released by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, children and adolescents need 60 minutes of physical activity every day. Being physically active can improve strength and endurance, help build healthy bones and muscles, help control weight, reduce anxiety, stress, and depression, improve academic achievement, and increase self-esteem. Recess plays a major role in students getting enough daily exercise. Recess has also been found to help students practice social skills – e.g., cooperation, following rules, problem solving, negotiation, sharing, communication – positively engage in classroom activities – e.g., being on-task, not being disruptive – and enhance cognitive performance – e.g., attention, memory.

Parents may need to talk to their local School Board to educate them about this new research. Recess plays such a critical role in keeping our children healthy and happy, so we need to speak up if the school is not effectively scheduling lunch and recess time. For more information on how to get involved, check out this [recess guide](#) for parents.

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