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New research: University vending machines fail the healthy food test

The first study of its kind in Australia has found unhealthy food and drinks vastly outweigh healthier options in university vending machines, with dietitians calling for an overhaul of on-campus vending machines.

The research, published in the Dietitians Association of Australia's journal *Nutrition & Dietetics*, involved an audit of the food and drinks sold in 61 vending machines at a large Australian university, and found 95 per cent of snacks, and 49 per cent of drinks on offer were kilojoule-laden or unhealthy options¹.

Over the nine months that sales were audited, more than 29,000 unhealthy snacks were sold, compared with just 1,570 healthy snacks – with chips and chocolate bars the most common snacks on offer.

And while bottled water was a strong seller, this was closely followed by sugary soft drinks sold in 600mL portions, providing an average 14 teaspoons of sugar per drink.

According to researcher Amanda Grech and her colleagues, the widespread availability of unhealthy foods and drinks on campus is at odds with nurturing academic performance.

“Unhealthy vending machines contribute to excess energy or kilojoule intake over time, and this is a big factor in contributing to weight gain.

“As an example, a typical snack from these vending machines is around 1,800 kilojoules, which is around three times the number of kilojoules we recommend for a snack,” said Ms Grech, an Accredited Practising Dietitian.

She said her research also found that, as well as being more readily available, the less-healthy foods and drinks were more heavily marketed and less expensive than the healthy options.

“Seventy-one per cent of snack vending machines had advertisements for chips on them, and 56 per cent of drink vending machines advertised soft drinks, putting these options front of mind for students,” said Ms Grech.

Emma Allchin, a student at the University of Sydney, concedes it is difficult to eat healthily on campus, when relying on vending machines.

The third-year student would like to see improvements in what is on offer, which she says is mainly ‘junk food’.

“I would like to see things like yoghurt, trail mix, and dip packs,” said Ms Allchin, who is studying a Bachelor of Science, majoring in nutrition and metabolism.

But while the findings are concerning, nutrition experts are optimistic, and confident they can be used to improve the health of young Australians.

MEDIA RELEASE

Dietitians Association of Australia spokesperson and Accredited Practising Dietitian Kellie Bilinski says there is a clear opportunity to use vending machines to increase the availability of healthy foods.

“Young adulthood is the perfect time to set the foundations for a lifetime of healthy eating. By making healthier foods and drinks more available, and promoting these, such as by selling them at lower prices, there’s a real chance to put the brakes on weight gain in young Aussies,” said Dr Bilinski.

She said health promotion interventions in other countries, including the USA, show healthy vending machine policies can improve food and drink choices without affecting profits.

“Uni students can also bring snacks like fruit, nuts or yoghurt from home, and take advantage of water re-fill stations on campus – which will help save money and boost energy levels and concentration, and ultimately improve health,” said Dr Bilinski.

For further information or to organise an interview with Amanda Grech or Kellie Bilinski, contact Felicity Curtain, Dietitians Association of Australia, on 0409 661 920.

Nutrition & Dietetics is the scientific journal of the Dietitians Association of Australia. It’s Australia’s leading peer-reviewed journal in its field and is published five times a year (February, April, July, September and November) by Wiley. For information on subscribing to *Nutrition & Dietetics*, including receiving new content alerts, visit: [http://ordering.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/subs.asp?ref=1747-0080&doi=10.1111/\(ISSN\)1747-0080](http://ordering.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/subs.asp?ref=1747-0080&doi=10.1111/(ISSN)1747-0080)

ⁱ Grech A et al. Are products sold in university vending machines nutritionally poor? A food environment audit. *Nutrition & Dietetics* 2017. Abstract available at: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1747-0080.12332/full>