

Dietary Snack Choices among Government and Private School Children in Southern Ghana: A Comparative Analysis of Healthy and Unhealthy Food Choices

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Highlights

- Unhealthy snacking increases obesity risk among school-aged children.
- Healthy snack intake is low across both school groups.
- School type influences snack choices among children in Southern Ghana.
- Private school children consume more ultra-processed snacks.

Abstract

Childhood dietary patterns are critical determinants of both immediate nutritional status and long-term health outcomes. Diet during the formative years influences linear growth, body composition, cognitive development, immune function, and the risk trajectory for cardiometabolic diseases across the life course. A major driver of the changing child nutrition profile in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is the nutrition transition. These shifts in food availability, affordability and preferences accompany urbanization, income change, globalized food markets and aggressive marketing of ultra-processed foods and sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs). This research compared healthy and unhealthy snack choices among children attending government and private schools in Southern Ghana. A cross-sectional study was conducted among 139 school-aged children. Food choices were categorized into healthy and unhealthy groups, with frequency of selection recorded as proportions. Data were analyzed by comparing percentages of food items selected or not selected as healthy or unhealthy snack choices across government and private schools. Unhealthy snack choices were prevalent across both school types. For carbonated drinks, it was ranked as the highest among choices, followed by starchy staples. Dark green leafy vegetable consumption was low among the choices. Intake of animal-source snacks such as eggs, milk, and milk products were also relatively low. These findings highlight the need for school-based nutrition education and policies that promote healthier dietary choices to address childhood malnutrition and prevent obesity. Both government and private school children demonstrated low consumption of nutrient-dense snacks such as fruits, vegetables, and animal-source foods, with relatively higher consumption of carbonated drinks and starchy staples.