MEAT - EATING HABITS OF 5 - 16 YEAR OLD CHILDREN

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Major dietary and nutrition surveys conducted in Australia have not defined the meat-eating habits of children under the age of 10 years, the contribution of nutrients from meat to their diet, and there is little detail of the meat-eating habits of adolescents (Commonwealth Department of Health 1986). Since meat has the potential to provide children with significant quantities of protein, minerals and vitamins, the present study was undertaken to determine the meat-eating habits of schoolchildren and nutrients consumed from this category of food.

The meat-eating habits of 838 children aged from five to 16 years from low and high socio-economic groups in 16 State primary and high schools were assessed. Children (or family member) completed a diary of meat-eating occurrences on Tuesday, Thursday and at the weekend during a single week. They were provided with a ruler to measure the dimensions of the meat eaten, and a cup to measure semi-liquid preparations such as casseroles and minces. Multiple regression analyses of the frequency of meat-eating and the amount of meat eaten, indicated that a stable pattern of meat-eating was established by five to six years' of age which remained unchanged until at least 14 - 16 years for females and 10 - 12 years for males. The major change in meat-eating behaviour occurred with 14 - 16 year old males who consumed double the quantity eaten by similarly aged females. The latter increase was primarily due to increased consumption of beef and chicken. Interestingly, socio-economic status had little influence on the quantity or type of meat eaten, with sausages, ham, beef mince, chicken drumsticks and takeaways such as meat pies being the most frequently consumed meats by children of all ages.

Nutritional analysis using SODA and calibration procedures, indicated that little change in the contribution of meat to the nutrient intake of children occurred from five to 16 years. Notable findings include meat providing up to 130% of the RDI for protein, 40% for iron, 60% for zinc, 30% for thiamine, 25% for riboflavin, and 95% for niacin. An important outcome was the finding that females frequently obtained significantly less of these key nutrients than their male counterparts, particularly from 14 -16 years' of age.

In summary, the study defined the meat-eating habits and subsequent nutrient intake of schoolage children. The results indicated that although meat contributes significant quantities of nutrients to children, the basis of the large difference in meat and nutrient intake between adolescent females and males needs further investigation.

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COMMONWEALTH DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH (1986). 'National Dietary Survey of Schoolchildren (aged 10 - 15 years)': No. 1 Foods Consumed. (AGPS: Canberra).

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