Eat Smart, Move More...On the Field!

Snacks Offered to Young, Recreational Soccer Players
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Background
About 45 million children in the United States participate in organized or school sports each year. Although sports settings have the potential to serve as avenues to promote healthy eating among children, research shows that unhealthy snacks and beverages are often offered during sports events. Furthermore, little research exists on the perceptions of coaches and parents of young children toward sports snacks and policies to support healthy eating.

Since children who are involved in organized sports spend so much time in this setting, it is important to get an idea of the types of popular snacks and beverages that are being provided to them post-game. Over three million youth in the United States are officially registered in soccer clubs, and of those, 144,197 reside in Virginia. Due to the growing popularity of soccer, our research team decided to study sports snacks issues within a local soccer club.

Objectives
Our objectives were two-fold:
1) Assess attitudes of coaches and parents toward sports snack policies and what snack foods and beverages are offered to child athletes
2) Determine nutrient content of available sports snacks

Study Design and Methods

Setting
- Under five (US) and under six (U6) soccer league within a large southeastern town.

Snack Observations
- Snack observations for 32 US and 28 U6 teams were recorded using an observational checklist.
- Mean values were calculated for the following key nutrients: calories, protein, fat, carbohydrates, fiber, sugars, and sodium.

Surveys
- Beverage and snack questionnaires were distributed among all parents (n=35) and coaches (23).
- The questionnaires assessed: sociodemographic information; types, as well as frequency, of snacks and beverages offered to children; reasons for snack and beverage choices; and attitudes toward snack policies.

Results - Snacks

SNACK OBSERVATIONS
Foods Observed (n=434)
- Fruits (n=124)
- Savory Snacks (n=117)
- Grain-Based Desserts (n=136)
- Dairy (food) (n=24)
- Candy (n=33)

Beverages Observed (n=253)
- Sugar Sweetened Beverages (n=232)
- Water (n=12)
- Dairy (beverage) (n=9)

Mean Nutrient Composition of Snacks

BEVERAGE AND SNACK QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PARENTS
35 Respondents

Consumation at Home
- The drinks and snacks that children most frequently consumed at home were: unflavored water, 2% milk, fruits, and vegetables.

Snack Practices
- 94% of parents participate in group snacks. When asked what types of snacks parents were planning on bringing, fruit, fruit juices, granola bars, water, and Goldfish™ were the most popular answers.
- Top reasons for supporting snacks: rewarding children for playing, nutrition and recovery purposes, and to satisfy children’s requests for snacks.

BEVERAGE AND SNACK QUESTIONNAIRE FOR COACHES AND TEAM PARENTS
23 Respondents

Reported efforts to support healthy snacking:
- 40% Suggested or helped set up a shared snack schedule
- 27% Asked each parent to have the child bring a water
- 4% Requested limits on what snacks were brought
- 13% Offered to bring snacks themselves

Conclusions
Even though nutrition was reported as the top consideration when choosing snacks and beverages, the snacks and beverages that were actually provided after soccer games were not necessarily nutritious. Snacks that were offered were high in sugar, sodium, and calories and low in fiber and protein. Coaches were receptive to setting limits on unhealthy items and recommending nutritious snack options. Snack policy implementation would be beneficial in youth sports settings, and based on our survey results there is reason to believe coaches and parents would react positively towards such policies. Future studies should be conducted among youth sports organizations nationwide to further evaluate the perceptions of parents and coaches and to ultimately guide the creation of standard sports snacks policies.

References