

“Look-alike” Smart Snacks in schools


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In 2013, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) established nutrition standards for snack foods sold in schools to encourage the sale of healthy snacks such as fruit, nuts, and yogurt. In response, food companies reformulated popular brands of chips and sweet snacks to meet Smart Snacks standards. While many of the reformulated products are only sold in schools, they are often packaged to look similar to the widely available less-nutritious versions. Selling these “copycat” or “look-alike” versions of junk food—such as Cheetos, Pop-tarts and Fruit Roll-ups—in schools confuses students and raises concerns about schools selling them.

The study

Middle- and high-school students and parents participated in an online experiment. They viewed information about a hypothetical school that was considering selling one of four different types of snacks to students. Participants then rated the individual snacks being considered for sale and the school selling them. Four options were tested:

New USDA Smart Snacks standards have improved the nutrition quality of snacks sold in schools. But look-alike Smart Snacks may limit schools’ ability to teach children about good nutrition.

School 1: Look-alike Smart Snacks	School 2: Regular unhealthy snacks	School 3: Repackaged Smart Snacks	School 4: Healthy brands
			
			
			

Key findings

- Selling look-alike Smart Snacks in schools confuses students and parents. It also allows junk food brands to promote their products to students in schools.

- Students believed that look-alike Smart Snacks and the less-nutritious versions of the brands sold in stores were similar in healthfulness and expected them to taste the same.
- Parents and students reported that they had seen four out of five of the look-alike Smart Snacks in stores, even though they are not widely available outside of schools.
- Students believed that they could still purchase the majority of the less-nutritious versions of these brands in their schools.
- The snacks sold in schools *matter*: selling look-alike snacks undermines schools' ability to teach good nutrition.
 - Both parents and students believed that schools selling look-alike Smart Snacks were less concerned about students' health and well-being than schools that only offered clearly more-nutritious snacks, including Smart Snacks in different packaging and only healthy brands.

At a minimum, marketing of look-alike Smart Snacks should not be allowed in schools.

Take action

School food service directors, school administrators, teachers, parents, school health professionals and food manufacturers have an opportunity to further improve the nutrition and food marketing environment in schools.

- School food service directors can work with vendors to increase the availability of nutritious snack foods, such as nuts, fruit, and yogurt in schools.
- School districts can strengthen local wellness policies to not allow marketing or sales of look-alike Smart Snacks in schools.
- Parents and public health advocates can demand that food manufacturers also offer Smart Snacks versions of their products for sale outside of schools, package these products to clearly differentiate them from less-nutritious versions of their brands, and stop targeting marketing for less-nutritious snacks directly to children and teens.

The Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at the University of Connecticut is a multi-disciplinary research center dedicated to promoting solutions to childhood obesity, poor diet, and weight bias through research and policy. For more information, visit www.UConnRuddCenter.org.

RESOURCES:

Harris JL, Hyary M, Schwartz MB (2016). Effects of Offering "look-alike" products as Smart Snacks in schools. *Childhood Obesity*. www.UConnRuddCenter.org/LookAlikeSmartSnacks

Snack FACTS: Evaluating snack food nutrition and marketing to youth (2015). http://www.uconnruddcenter.org/files/Pdfs/SnackFACTS_2015_Fulldraft03.pdf