Cafeteria veggies to increase What s salt got to do with it?

By ACSH Staff — January 26, 2012

Kids may start seeing more fruits and veggies on their lunch plates and fewer French fries, following new standards set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture on Wednesday for school meals. Coordinating with First Lady Michelle Obama s Let s Move! campaign, the new regulations aim to fight childhood obesity [1] and improve nutrition. According to the new standards, schools must offer both fruits and vegetables every day, increase the availability of whole grains, reduce fat and sodium content, and serve only fat-free or low-fat milk. Additionally, schools will manage meal portion sizes and ensure that the calorie content is appropriate based on the children s age range.

These new policies will affect the almost 32 million U.S. children who eat school meals. While the regulations will not remove any specific foods from the menu, they aim to provide healthier alternatives while still making the meals appealing to children. For instance, baked sweet potato fries might be offered instead of tater tots.

ACSH s Dr. Ruth Kava, ACSH s senior fellow in nutrition, applauds this movement toward healthier eating at schools. School lunches are not the largest part of a child s diet, so this measure cannot singlehandedly defeat obesity, she notes. But what young children eat at school still sets a model for future healthy eating. This is the period in life where children s food preferences and habits are being set.

On the other hand, ACSH s Dr. Gilbert Ross points out that, although the program makes many important changes such as addressing portion size and making sure that fruits and vegetables are available, there are certain parts of the initiative that distract from the goal of curbing obesity. The recommendation to cut down on sodium in kids food is both irrelevant and misguided, he says. There are no data showing that children should be restricting their sodium intake in schools. Even the evidence in adults suggests that most people will not benefit and some people may even be harmed [2] by following the ridiculously low federal guidelines on sodium. And clearly sodium ingestion has zero to do with fighting obesity. Dr. Ross adds that he hopes that the current focus on school menus does not distract from two important points: Most calories are consumed outside of school, so parents need to keep focused on healthy diets at home; and we can t forget the other side of the calorie equation: exercise.