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More healthy choices for schoolkids

BY ASHLEY M. HEHER
 THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CHICAGO -- Mark Smith is convinced he can turn a generation of junk-food eaters into die-hard devotees of what he calls "the salsa of this decade."

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The dynamo treat? Single-serve portions of hummus, and it may be coming to a school cafeteria near you.

As the federal government prepares to raise standards for food served in schools, vendors like Smith are rolling out healthier versions of lunchroom favorites. Now there are whole-grain pizzas and baked chicken nuggets, along with new offerings like hummus. It's all part of an uphill -- and so far losing -- battle to slow rising obesity rates.

Government rules, which limit fat and require certain levels of vitamins and protein, are about to get tougher. The Agriculture Department, which oversees the national school lunch and breakfast programs, plans to announce changes this year.

Eating habits

A recent Associated Press review of school nutrition studies found that classes on healthy foods and menu changes in the lunchroom have had little effect in altering generally bad eating habits of U.S. schoolkids.

"I've witnessed kids who have a choice of fresh foods and vegetables and other choices and they choose the other choices, because that's what kids do," said Dr. Reginald Washington of Denver, who is on a committee on childhood obesity for the American Academy of Pediatrics. Kids agree. Sean McCarney, a 12-year-old from North Huntington, Pa., says his peers are "programmed to like fried stuff so it's hard for them to change over."

Food suppliers

While hawking his hummus and pita chips at this week's School Nutrition Association annual meeting in Chicago, Smith rattled off the health benefits of the garbanzo bean-based dip.

"It tastes really good," he said. But it may not be for everyone, especially young eaters, said the vice president of sales for Ziyad Brothers Importing of Cicero, Ill. "The name hummus scares them a little bit," he said.

When Perdue Farms tested chicken nuggets with whole-grain breading two years ago, "it came out looking like baked bugs," said Doylene Jones, national sales manager for the company's school food service. "It doesn't do you any good to make something if the kids are going to throw it in the trash can," she said.

Now the Salisbury, Md., company's most popular school sellers include drumsticks and spicy breaded chicken bites with a partial whole-grain breading that are baked in cafeterias.

Online: American Academy of Pediatrics, www.aap.org

USDA, www.usda.gov

School Nutrition Association, www.asfsa.org

Reviews of new, more healthful lunchroom fare

This year's School Nutrition Association annual convention offered a bonanza of new offerings. Here are some cafeteria-ready dishes sampled by The Associated Press.

Otis Spunkmeyer's cookies: A longtime lunchroom tradition, these 1-ounce cookies now come in a reduced-fat variety. They're a decent substitute for the full-fat version - even if the taste is a little off.

Wild Garden's Hummus to Go: No refrigeration is needed for these portable hummus-filled cones. Creamy and mild, the traditional flavor has a bit of a tang and is made with chickpeas, sesame paste, sea salt and spices.

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Perdue Farms' SnackAtizer: This spicy chicken bite has heavy whole-grain breading and manages a consistency that's somewhere between moist and dry. With 10 mininuggets per serving, the chicken is baked in the oven for serving and tastes fresh.

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Schwan Co.'s Big Daddy's Pizza: Bye-bye rectangles. These pizza slices look like pizzeria pizza and come in 7-inch and 16-inch pies. The "harvest" variety is made with a whole-grain crust that tastes doughy and dense. The pizza isn't greasy but is a little salty.

Wawona's Fruit Singles Frozen Fruit Pops: Think Popsicle with a chewy center. These no-sugar-added peach and strawberry treats are made from mashed and frozen fruit and taste good enough to be found on the grocery shelf.

-- *The Associated Press*

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