

School feeding programs may have some small benefits for disadvantaged children

Clinical question	Do school feeding programs improve the physical and psychosocial health of disadvantaged elementary school children?
Bottom line	School meals may have some small benefits for disadvantaged children. Results from higher income countries are mixed, but generally positive. For height, results from lower income countries are mixed. In randomised controlled trials (RCTs), differences in gains are important only for younger children, but results from the controlled before and after trials (CBAs) are large and significant overall. Results for height from high income countries are mixed, but generally positive. In low income countries, children who are fed at school attend school more frequently than those in control groups; this finding translates to an average increase of 4 to 6 days a year per child.
Caveat	For educational and cognitive outcomes, children who are fed at school gain more than controls on maths achievement, and on some short-term cognitive tasks.
Context	Early malnutrition and/or micronutrient deficiencies can negatively affect many aspects of child health and development. School feeding programs are designed to provide food to hungry children and to improve their physical, mental and psychosocial health.
Cochrane Systematic Review	Kristjanson EA et al. School feeding programs for improving the physical and psychosocial health of disadvantaged elementary school children. Cochrane Reviews, 2007, Issue 1. This review contains 18 studies ranging from 106 participants to 785. Some of the subgroups were considerably smaller.
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