

# School gardens linked with kids eating more vegetables

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Children who learn to garden and cook in the TX Sprouts program led by researchers at The University of Texas at Austin were found to consume more vegetables. Credit: The University of Texas at Austin

Getting children to eat their vegetables can seem like an insurmountable task, but nutrition researchers at The University of Texas at Austin have found one way: school gardens and lessons on using what's grown in them.

Researchers worked with 16 [elementary schools](#) across Central Texas to install [vegetable](#) gardens and teach classes to students and parents about nutrition and cooking. In a study recently published in the *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, the team describes specifically targeting schools with a high percentage of students on the free and reduced-price lunch program to understand how nutrition programs affect low-income groups. Each [school](#) was studied for one academic year.

The study found that students who participated in the gardening, [nutrition](#) and cooking classes ate, on average, a half serving more vegetables per day than they did before the program.

"A lot of the families in these schools live with [food insecurity](#). They live in food deserts and face a higher risk of childhood obesity and related health issues," said Jaimie Davis, associate professor of nutritional sciences at UT Austin and the lead author of the paper. "Teaching kids where their food comes from, how to grow it, how to prepare it—that's key to changing eating behaviors over the long term."

In addition to tracking what the children ate, the study looked at weight, body mass index and blood pressure. During the nine months of the study, there were no statistically significant changes in those measures of health. The study involved more than 3,000 students in the third through fifth grades.

Although a half serving increase in vegetable consumption per day may seem like a small change, it's extremely encouraging to Davis and her

colleagues.

"Behavior changes can be difficult to achieve, especially long term," Davis said. "Changes to health parameters like blood pressure may take longer to manifest. Getting children to eat more vegetables can potentially set them up for long-term success."

Previous studies have shown that increased fruit and vegetable consumption can promote health and lower the risk of developing cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and some cancers. More fruits and vegetables may play a role in reduced obesity in adults, but the effects have not been well studied in children.

"We have been able to introduce [children](#) to a wide variety of vegetables that they've never had access to," Davis said. "Parents I talk with ask, 'How did you get my kid to eat kale?' But when they grow the kale from seed and learn how to prepare it in olive oil and bake it into kale chips, they love it."

**More information:** Jaimie N. Davis et al, School-based gardening, cooking and nutrition intervention increased vegetable intake but did not reduce BMI: Texas sprouts - a cluster randomized controlled trial, *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity* (2021). [DOI: 10.1186/s12966-021-01087-x](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12966-021-01087-x)

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