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Call for better cafeterias as pupils bypass school ban on fizzy drinks

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Forty per cent of pupils in Scotland regularly have sugar-laden fizzy drinks during their lunch break despite a ban on their sale on school premises, a study has found.

Researchers called on head teachers to make school cafeterias, which provide healthier food and drink, more inviting rather than imposing bans that are easily avoided.

A team at the University of Hertfordshire found that more than four in ten students sidestepped rules banning the sale of unhealthy drinks on school premises by simply buying them from nearby shops during breaks. Those pupils were also more likely to buy unhealthy foods such as chips and sweets.

The researchers called for greater effort to be put into tempting teenagers to stay put and eat healthier food provided at school rather than venturing outside the gates.

Wendy Wills, director of the centre for research in primary and community care at the university, said the findings were "of major concern" and backed new restrictions on the sale of energy drinks to under-16s.

"While we need a strategy to reduce the consumption of sugar-filled drinks by young people, simply removing access to soft drinks within schools is clearly not enough, as a number of the young people we studied were able to leave the school premises during their lunch period to visit nearby shops," she said.

"It is imperative that schools provide healthier options alongside a more

desirable social environment and that they include young people in these decisions. School meals may be more nutritious than food or drink available outside the school, but they are not always enticing or enjoyable.

"Providing students with a choice of affordable nutritious foods and a cafeteria that allows them to socialise with their friends in a less restrictive way may encourage young people to stay

within the school premises."

The study examined the habits of more than 500 Scottish 13 to 15-year-olds at eight schools. Forty-one per cent had soft drinks or energy drinks during their lunch breaks despite the ban within school grounds. They consumed four times more sugar than those who did not buy such drinks.

Overall, 77 per cent reported buying food and drink from outside school at least twice a week. Some young people reported drinking sugary drinks while eating no food at all.

Students who had a sugary drink at lunchtime were significantly more likely to have a soft drink or an energy drink at mid-morning break as well.

Professor Wills said she was against banning students from leaving school at break times, saying that often there was not enough room to accommodate them and that pupils could still find ways to break the rules.

In September the Scottish Health Survey indicated that more than a quarter of children in the country were either overweight or obese. The figures were even higher among Scottish adults, with 36 per cent overweight and 29 per cent obese.