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School holiday snacks: Can we make everyday treats work harder for health?

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By Christian Philippsen, Managing Director, BENEO Asia

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Every year, the mid-year school holidays change the rhythm of family life. Snackboxes are replaced by long afternoons at home, quick outings or playdates, tuition breaks, and more frequent requests for a midday snack.

Biscuits, pastries, chocolate milk, wafers, and buns all sit in that space between convenience and comfort. They are easy to carry, easy to share, and almost always readily accepted by children.

But they also raise a question that food manufacturers can no longer ignore: can the snacks children love also deliver better nutrition? This is not about removing joy from food. Childhood snacks do not need to become clinical, bland, or unrecognisable. The real opportunity is much more practical: improving the nutritional profile of everyday products while keeping the taste, texture and familiarity that families expect.

The Hidden Weight of Everyday Snacking

Across Southeast Asia, snacking is deeply embedded in daily life. In many households, a packet of biscuits with milk, a sweet bun after class, a cereal bar between activities, or a cold beverage on a hot afternoon is not seen as indulgence. It is simply part of the day.

Many of these products were originally designed around taste, shelf life, cost and convenience â?? not necessarily long-term nutrition. Sugar, in particular, plays many roles in food. It contributes sweetness, colour, mouthfeel, bulk, preservation and browning. In bakery and confectionery, it helps create the sensory qualities consumers recognise immediately. In beverages, it can shape the entire drinking experience.

This makes sugar reduction more complicated than simply taking sugar out or replacing it with artificial sweeteners.

At the same time, public health guidance is moving in a clear direction. The World Health Organization recommends reducing free sugar intake to less than 10% of total energy intake, with further benefits from reducing it below 5% where possible[1]. In Southeast Asia, the issue is especially relevant for children: A UNICEF-supported study across seven Southeast Asian countries found that 72% of snacks and finger foods marketed for children under three contained added sugars or sweeteners [2].

Parents are becoming more aware of this. Many now check labels, compare products, and look for claims such as â??less sugarâ?•, â??high fibreâ?•, â??low GIâ?•, or â??supports gut healthâ?•. But awareness alone does not solve the problem. If healthier products do not taste good, children will reject them.

For manufacturers, this is where the real reformulation challenge begins.

Healthier Snacks Must Still Feel Like Snacks

In this region, taste and texture is non-negotiable. A biscuit must still have the right snap. A soft bun must still feel indulgent. A cereal bar must still be chewy, not dry. A beverage must still feel refreshing, not thin or medicinal.

Better-for-you reformulation needs to go beyond subtraction. It is not only about reducing sugar, but also about what can be added, replaced, or rebalanced to deliver more nutritional value without losing consumer appeal.

Prebiotic fibres are a possible solution. Chicory root fibres, such as inulin and oligofructose, are well-established prebiotic fibres that selectively nourish beneficial gut bacteria such as bifidobacteria, to contribute to good digestive health[3].

Fibre intake remains a concern in many diets as most people are not consuming the recommended daily intake of fibreBy incorporating prebiotic fibres into their favourite formats such as biscuits, bars, confectionery, dairy or beverages, manufacturers can help close part of that gap in a way that fits existing eating habits.

Just as importantly, these fibres can support the sensory side of reformulation. Inulin and oligofructose are soluble dietary fibres that allow for easy processing without adapting or changing the production process, making it especially relevant for products where simply reducing sugar would otherwise leave a gap in texture, structure, or quality.

Sugar Reduction Without the Compromise

Another promising route is the use of better carbohydrates. The goal is not to eliminate carbohydrates, as children need them to provide energy for learning, play, and growth. The issue is the type and quality of carbohydrates they consume. Rapidly available sugars can contribute to sharper rises and falls in blood glucose levels, while slow-release carbohydrates can provide a steadier energy supply.

Palatinoseâ?¢, for example, is a slowly yet fully digestible carbohydrate that provides a steadier and more sustained energy supply. In cereal bars or beverages, Palatinoseâ?¢ can help create products positioned around sustained energy. In baked goods or confectionery, it offers an alternative to conventional sugar systems for brands looking to reduce glycaemic impact while maintaining a pleasant taste profile.

Reformulation should not feel like punishment. The science has to work quietly in the background.

The Opportunity for Food Manufacturers

For food and beverage manufacturers in Southeast Asia, the school holiday season highlights a much bigger year-round opportunity. Families want convenience, but not at the expense of health. Children want familiar treats, but parents are increasingly questioning what those treats deliver.

A biscuit can remain crisp and enjoyable while containing added fibre. A bar can provide energy while offering a better carbohydrate profile. A bakery treat can feel indulgent while being reformulated with fewer nutritional trade-offs. A beverage can still be refreshing while moving away from the old assumption that sweetness must come primarily from sucrose.

This is where ingredient innovation becomes commercially valuable. Rather than treating reformulation as a defensive exercise, brands can use it to build products with clearer benefits from the start.

Prebiotic fibres can support digestive wellness; slow-release carbohydrates can support steadier energy. Together with careful product development, they allow manufacturers to create snacks that consumers continue to enjoy, but with a stronger health proposition.

Making Everyday Treats Better

The future of childrenâ??s snacking in Southeast Asia will not be built only around niche health foods. It will be shaped by the everyday products families already know: the biscuits packed for a road trip, the bar eaten between activities, the bun bought after class, the drink shared on a hot afternoon.

For parents, the ideal snack is not one that forces a trade-off between enjoyment and nutrition. For children, it is not one that tastes â??healthyâ?• in the worst sense of the word. For manufacturers, the challenge is to make better nutrition feel seamless.

School holidays simply make this more visible. When children snack more often, the quality of those snacks matters more. And when everyday treats are reformulated with better ingredients, less sugar, more fibre, and smarter carbohydrates, the snack aisle starts to look less like a problem and more like an opportunity.

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[1] World Health Organization. (2015). Guideline: Sugars intake for adults and children. https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241549028

[2] UNICEF Viet Nam. (2023, December 19). New study reveals high sugar and salt content in commercial foods marketed for young children in Southeast Asia. https://www.unicef.org/vietnam/press-releases/new-study-reveals-high-sugar-and-salt-content-commercial-foods-marketed-young

[3] https://www.beneo.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/beneo-paper-chicory-root-fibers-us-201908v5-web-usletter.pdf