



**THE HEART LINKS PROJECT**  
A MEMBER OF THE NYS HEALTHY HEART COALITION

## **The Dangers of Eating Fast Food**

In a society that functions at a high speed, fast food has quickly been adopted as the preferred food of choice. Fast food restaurants and their advertisements are permeating our neighborhoods, schools, television, and culture. Burger King and Big Mac burgers have become defining foods of the typical American diet. Corporate goals aim to make these chains more geographically accessible, adding more and more chains to our neighborhood streets. McDonald's and Burger King are not the only fast food industries invading our communities, our minds, and our stomachs; Taco Bell, Pizza Hut, Kentucky Fried Chicken are just a few others. These industries are successful because they offer consumers a quick, cheap, convenient and tasty meal that is all too often high in fat and salt content and low in fiber and calcium. Creative marketing strategies that offer super-value meals or super-size perks result in further promotion of these industries. Unhealthy processed foods such as these are a potential health threat since they contribute to the increased prevalence of obesity and chronic disease among Americans.

Obesity is becoming the largest public health concern as we enter the new millenium, especially among children. Obesity increases the risk for high cholesterol and fatty streak development, which translates into greater risk for cardiovascular disease. One meal at a fast food restaurant may contribute a significant amount of fat and sodium for the day. For example, McDonald's new Spanish omelet bagel contains 710 calories, 40 grams of fat, 275 mg of cholesterol and 1,520 mg of sodium. High fat diets and bigger portions in combination with decreased physical activity play major roles in the obesity epidemic. Technology has its drawbacks since fewer children are playing basketball and the majority of them "surf the net" instead. Children consuming diets high in fat often displace nutrient dense foods such as whole grains, fruits and vegetables. Diets high in fat are also typically low in fiber because of the lack of complex carbohydrates. Complex carbohydrates are often high in fiber, which is associated with lower cholesterol levels, improved digestive function, and decreased risk of cardiovascular disease and some forms of cancer. Some studies have shown that increasing dietary fiber among children may be preventative in the development of childhood obesity. Unfortunately fast foods are more palatable, more filling and more caloric per bite, resulting in greater demand and increased consumption. Fast food also has many social implications, often acceptable in peer environments or associated as rewards or celebratory meals.

The high salt content of fast foods also pose many threats to the health of Americans, young and old. Salt consumption is associated with high blood pressure, strokes, and kidney function. In addition, some studies have shown that calcium competes with sodium. In other words, as the intake of sodium increases, there is an increase in the urinary excretion of calcium. This increased excretion of calcium may be responsible for reduced peak bone mass and increased bone demineralization which, in turn, increases the risk for osteoporosis and bone fractures among women. This concept is extremely important when thinking in terms of children who are in the critical stage of developing bone density.

The recommended limit for sodium is 2,200 mg. On average, however, women consume 3,200 mg per day. Exceeding these recommendations is often easy since a Burger King Whopper contains 870 mg of sodium and a large order of McDonald's fries contains 290 mg, making it possible for individuals to reach more than half the limit in one meal. On the other hand, the RDA for calcium is 800 mg per day but the average intake among women is less than 600 mg. This information illustrates the need for healthy food alternatives. Incorporating nutrient dense food choices and healthy snacks into an active lifestyle may help improve health of the general population and prevent the onset of disease.

It is apparent that fast foods are always a temptation because they are widely available, convenient and cheap, but as parents and educators it is important to set examples for children to emulate. Parents and educators can be more involved in increasing awareness regarding the negative effects of fast foods and discourage children from consuming them. Since many food patterns begin during childhood, parents and teachers should avoid using fast foods as rewarding meals and attempt to educate children on healthy food choices. Super-sizing meals to get more for your dollar may contribute to unnecessary calories and fat. Encouraging the consumption of a balanced diet, high in complex carbohydrates such as legumes, fruits, vegetables, and whole grains may result in many health benefits. In addition, promoting a diet rich in calcium, which is found in dairy sources such as low-fat milk and cheese or in other sources such as broccoli or kale promotes peak bone mass and decreased risk for osteoporosis and bone fractures later in life. In general, a diet low in fat, especially saturated fat, low in salt and high in fiber and calcium can prevent obesity and disease. Advocating nutrient dense diets, rich in whole grains, fresh fruits, and vegetables and increased physical activity may serve as the greatest investment of society, the health of our youth.

Parents and teachers can educate and empower children by involving them in creating simple, fun, and creative homemade alternatives. Teaching children skills such as grating cheese, washing and cutting vegetables, may make them more apt to preparing meals themselves, and less likely to purchase fast foods. Some ideas are baked potatoes, which are a good source of potassium, iron and vitamin C. They can be topped with low-fat sour cream, reduced fat cheese and steamed vegetables such as broccoli. Another idea is homemade pizza made with pita bread, tomato sauce, grated low fat cheese, and fresh vegetables. Other ideas are turkey burgers made with lettuce, low fat cheese and mayonnaise or burritos made with baked beans, low-fat cheese, and vegetables. The ultimate message is that nutritious meals can be fun and can be incorporated into everyday life. Showing children how to prepare low fat snacks and meals may deter them from developing unhealthy eating patterns and prevent the onset of obesity and disease.

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