Statement of CSPI Nutrition Policy Director Margo Wootan on the Findings of *From Wallet to Waistline*

Anyone who’s ever been to a fast-food restaurant knows the drill: Order fries or a Coke, and you’re immediately told there’s a better deal. You can get bigger fries or a larger Coke for just a few pennies more. Order a burger and they urge you to make it a “value meal.” Whether they call it king-sizing, super-sizing or a combo deal, for many Americans, it’s an offer that’s hard to refuse. And many don’t.

The industry calls these tactics “value marketing.” They say that they’re just providing “value” by providing more food for less money. But let’s be perfectly clear: Consumers aren’t urged to spend less money for more food, they’re urged to spend more money for more food. The amount of money it costs to upgrade to larger serving sizes is usually small, but often you’re buying extra calories you don’t need.

We wanted to find out exactly how many extra calories and fat grams Americans are getting in these so-called bargains. So last month we sent researchers into the field in Washington, DC, Des Moines, Iowa, Little Rock, Arkansas, and Sacramento and Oakland, California. We visited fast-food restaurants, movie theaters, convenience stores, and other shops and recorded prices and sizes of popular foods. We also made note of marketing prompts on point-of-purchase displays and from cashiers and clerks.

We compared the increase in price to the corresponding increase in calories and fat of different serving sizes of foods. We found that Americans who take advantage of large sizes when eating out pay just a few pennies more but get more calories and fat than they bargained for.

Upgrading from a 3-ounce Minibon to a Classic Cinnabon costs just 24% more, but delivers 123% more calories. That means that for just 48 cents, you end up with 370 extra calories.

At 7-Eleven, moving up from the regular Gulp Coke to a Double Gulp costs just 37 cents, but provides 450 extra calories – as many calories as in a McDonald’s Quarter Pounder. By paying 42% more, you get 300% more calories.

Moving from a small to a medium bag of movie theater popcorn costs an average of 71 cents – and 500 calories. A 23% increase in price provides 125% more calories plus two days’ worth of artery-clogging saturated fat. And that’s “unbuttered” popcorn.
At 7-Eleven, 33 more cents buys you “The Big One” instead of the regular-sized Snickers candy bar. Getting the bigger candy bar also costs you an extra 230 calories.

“Do you want fries with that?” Point-of-purchase displays and employee prompts encourage customers to purchase “value meals.” The practice known as bundling – turning a fast-food sandwich into a “value meal” by adding sides like fries and a soft drink – is responsible for some of the largest increases in calories we found.

A Wendy’s Classic Double with Cheese packs a considerable 760 calories and a day’s worth of saturated fat (19 grams). Turning it into an Old Fashioned Combo Meal adds 600 more calories and 7 more grams of saturated fat, but it costs just $1.57 more. People usually want to eat meals, rather than just an entree. But fast-food bundling generally steers customers toward high-calorie, low-nutrition foods like French fries and soft drinks rather than toward healthier options like salads and yogurt parfaits.

None of the fast-food outlets we visited featured “value”-priced meals that contained soft drinks and fries in small sizes, except with kid-sized meals. It costs 8 cents more to purchase a McDonald’s Quarter Pounder with Cheese, a small fries and a small Coke separately than to buy the Quarter Pounder with Cheese Large Extra Value Meal, which comes with a large fries and a large Coke. So McDonald’s actually charges customers more to buy a smaller, lower-calorie meal. The large meal provides 490 more calories than the small.

Large portions and “value” marketing encourage overeating and contribute to the skyrocketing rates of obesity in adults and children. Larger portions not only provide more calories, but studies show that when people are served more food, they eat more food, and a national survey by the American Institute for Cancer Research found that when people eat out, two-thirds report eating their entire meal all or most of the time.

Pricing practices provide yet another reason why consumers need better nutrition information at restaurants. The Center for Science in the Public Interest is urging federal, state, and local legislatures to require that fast-food and other chain restaurants disclose calories along with price on menu boards and menus. To make informed choices, consumers need to know the cost to their wallets – and their waistlines.

“Value” marketing is ubiquitous and getting more for your money is ingrained in the American psyche. But bigger is rarely better when it comes to food. The true price of larger portions is larger calorie and saturated fat numbers – and larger waistlines.

Now Melanie Polk from the American Institute for Cancer Research will tell us more about how consumers can protect their pocketbooks, their waistline, and their arteries.