

Healthy Restaurant Children's Meals Improve Children's Diets and Health

Some children with obesity as young as eight years have detectable early warning signs of heart disease,¹ and the prevalence of type 2 diabetes in children and youth is increasing.² While parents are primarily responsible for feeding their children healthfully, they cannot always prepare meals at home. Restaurants and communities should support parents' efforts to feed their children well.

The Nutritional Quality of Restaurant Meals Matters to Children's Diets *Children frequently eat at restaurants*

- A 2012 analysis reported that 33% of children eat foods or beverages from fast-food restaurants and 12% from full-service restaurants on a typical day.³
- The National Center for Health Statistics estimated that about 14% of children and adolescents obtained between 25% and 45% of their daily calories from fast food between 2015 and 2018; 11% of children and adolescents obtained more than 45% of their daily calories from fast food.⁴
- Fast food consumption by children and teens increased between 2008 and 2018.⁵

Restaurants are a top marketer to children

- According to the Federal Trade Commission, fast-food restaurants spent \$583 million on marketing directed to children in 2009 (the latest year for which data are available).⁶ Fast food marketing represents 40% of all youth-directed food marketing, making it the most commonly advertised food and beverage category to children and teens.⁷
- Preschoolers, children, and teens viewed on average 2.1 to 2.3 fast-food TV ads per day in 2019.⁸
- Marketing particular foods to children by designating them as "kids' menu items" and by bundling them together as meals establishes food norms for children, which could affect their preferences in other settings.⁹
- In 2015, researchers reported that after controlling for parental fast-food consumption and demographics, children ages 3 to 5 years who usually knew what toys were offered by fast-food restaurants were more likely to have eaten McDonald's in the past week than those without this knowledge.¹⁰

The meals promoted as children's meals are consumed by the youngest kids

- At fast-food and burger restaurants, families are more likely to order from children's menus for kids under the age of six years than for older children.¹¹
- Data on the overall proportion of children who eat from children's menus varies by age. In one nationwide sample, parents reported ordering from the children's menu for their children during 67% of restaurant visits, and even higher for children under the age of six years, at 74%.¹²

Studies show a link between restaurant meals and poor nutrition

- Child consumption of restaurant meals has been associated with higher consumption of calories, sugary drinks, saturated fat, and total sugars, and food away from home has lower nutrient density compared to meals at home.^{13,14}
- The proportion of children whose food consumption from restaurants is of poor diet quality is around 80%; for adults this number is 65%.¹⁵
- The majority (71.9%) of children's meals at the nation's largest chain restaurants in 2018 failed to meet a set of expert nutrition standards.¹⁶ This is virtually unchanged from 2012, when 71.8% of meals failed to meet expert nutrition standards. Many meals in 2018 were high in calories (60.3%), sodium (45%), and saturated fat plus trans fat (40%).¹⁷
- A recent analysis found that approximately one in four children eating at five common fast-food restaurants consumed a full-calorie soft drink.¹⁸
 - Soda and other sugary drinks are the top source of added sugars in the American diet and account for nearly a quarter of the added sugars consumed by Americans.¹⁹
 - Excessive consumption of added sugars contributes to an increased risk of developing type 2 diabetes,²⁰ heart disease,²¹ and obesity in adults.²² For children, excessive consumption of added sugars increases the risk of dental caries²³ and weight gain.²⁴ "A systematic review of scientific evidence finds that weight gain in childhood can increase susceptibility to cardiovascular disease in adulthood."²⁵
 - A child-sized cola contains approximately 40 grams of added sugars,²⁶ which exceeds the 25 grams of added sugars that the American Heart Association (AHA) has established as the daily upper limit for children.²⁷ The AHA recommends that children consume no more than eight ounces of sugary drinks per week.²⁸ However, children are likely to exceed this recommendation in a single fast food meal as kid-sized beverages are usually six to twelve ounces.²⁹

Voluntary improvements by restaurants are slow

- In 2016, the majority of kids' meal combinations at fast-food and full-service restaurants exceeded the recommend 770 mg of sodium per meal, with the average quick-service meal containing 863mg of sodium and the average full-service meal containing 1,046mg.³⁰
- Sugary drinks remain highly prevalent on children's menus. Among the top-50 restaurant chains that included beverages as part of their children's meals in 2019, nearly two-thirds include sugary drinks on their children's menus.³¹
- Restaurants have made some progress improving children's meals and the National Restaurant Association has formed Kids LiveWell, a voluntary program to help restaurants increase healthful options for children.³²
- In February of 2018, McDonald's announced nutrition standards for its' kids' meals; stating that its Happy Meals will contain 600 calories or fewer and have reduced sugar and saturated fat.³³ However, no other major restaurant chain has made a similar commitment.

Healthier Restaurant Children's Meals Support Healthier Eating by Children

Changing the offerings on children's menus, including changing defaults, can affect what children eat. Evidence from a wide range of fields (including retirement plans, organ donation, health care,

and food/nutrition) shows that people tend to stick with defaults. In addition, setting beneficial defaults has high rates of acceptability (defaults are the option people automatically receive if they do not choose something else).

- Children themselves have indicated an interest in ordering healthier kids' meals. A 2015 study reported that more than half the children ages 8 to 12 years surveyed who order children's meals said that they would be somewhat or very likely to order a children's meal that came with vegetables (56.2%) or fruits (78.9%).³⁴
- In one 2014 study, 37% of parents who didn't currently purchase kids' meals expressed willingness to purchase kids' meals if there were healthy options available.³⁵
- Children's meals with healthier defaults at Walt Disney theme parks resulted in 21% fewer meal calories compared to meals with unhealthy defaults.³⁶ In this same study, parents ordered healthy side dishes 48% of the time and healthier beverages 66% of the time.³⁷
- Research suggests that healthier children's menus may be associated with positive changes in sales of healthier items over unhealthier items. A 2015 study reported that sales of strawberry and vegetable sides, and milk increased and sales of french fries declined.³⁸
- According to an independent verification firm, "McDonald's USA sold 21 million more low-fat and fat-free milk jugs and 100% apple juice boxes in the first 11 months in Happy Meals and a la carte after removing the listing of sodas on the Happy Meal section of menu boards, compared to the same period a year earlier (July 2014 to May 2015)."³⁹

Changing children's meals sends a positive message and models healthy eating for children

- Food marketing influences children's food preferences,⁴⁰ and fast-food restaurants spend more than breakfast cereals and carbonated beverages combined marketing food to children.⁴¹ This marketing, including through television, internet, toys, and which foods are promoted as children's meals, should be used to promote healthier options to children, rather than encouraging nutrition-poor options.
- Removing sugary drinks from children's menus can send a signal that they are not appropriate everyday beverages for children. The vast majority of children consume more calories from added sugars than is recommended for good health,⁴² and the number one source of added sugars in the American diet is sugary beverages.⁴³ Among children aged 2-13 y, 61-80% of males and 57-78% of females the exceed recommended daily intake for added sugars.⁴⁴
- Using toys to promote only healthy meals could change consumption patterns. One study estimated that children are more likely to select healthier meal options if toy premiums are used to promote only healthier meals.⁴⁵

The public health community supports improving restaurant children's meals

- The 2015 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee recommended that restaurants make healthy options the default choice by, for example, offering fat-free or low-fat milk instead of soda or other sugary drinks, and fruit and non-fried vegetables as side dishes in children's meals.⁴⁶
- Representatives from the American Heart Association, Center for Science in the Public Interest, and ChangeLab Solutions support the adoption of the RAND Corporation's Performance Standards for Restaurants. The RAND standards for restaurant children's meals

are consistent with the 2010-2015 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* and recommend restaurant children’s meals include at least two sources of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean protein, or lower fat dairy, and limit fat (including trans and saturated fat), sugars, and sodium, and do not include a sugary drink.⁴⁷ The RAND standards align closely with the National Restaurant Association’s Kids LiveWell nutrition standards for restaurant children’s meals.⁴⁸

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