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BIG

MOVIE THEATERS FILL BUCKETS...AND BELLIES

BY JAYNE HURLEY & BONNIE LIEBMAN

Ready to sit back and enjoy the movie? Not yet. First, the theater is hoping you'll stop by the concession stand for a snack. You know, something light...like, say, a bucket of popcorn with the calories of a Hamburger plus a Quarter Pounder plus a Big Mac at McDonald's.

Surely, no one expects you to sit through a two-hour movie with nothing to eat or drink. After all, you're burning dozens of calories in there, what with all that leg crossing, shifting around in your seat...and reaching for some popcorn.

With all that activity, you can really work up an appetite, especially if you're still growing. And, sad to say, many adults are.

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Movie Theaters Fill Buckets ...and BELLIES

What's the healthiest snack to buy at the movies? You can go for 400 to 1,200 calories' worth of popcorn that (at many theaters) is essentially fried in one to three days' worth of saturated fat. Or you can buy a package of candy with 300 to 1,100 empty calories (plus at least half a day's sat fat if it's chocolate). Soft drinks dispatch another 150 to 500 calories to your thirsty fat cells. The best snack at the movies? No snack at all.

Information compiled by Amy Ramsay, with help from Melissa Pryputniewicz.

POPCORN

Did you know that popcorn is among the healthiest—and tastiest—snacks around?" asks the Web site of the Popcorn Board, an industry group. "It's a whole grain food that's low in calories and fat and it's a complex carbohydrate."

Maybe that's one reason people fork over \$4 to \$8 for a bag or tub of popcorn when they enter a movie theater. It sounds like they're munching on a stalk of broccoli, for goodness sakes.

Turns out the Popcorn Board is right...if you're talking low-fat popcorn or (fat-free) air-popped. Eating a tub of movie theater popcorn is more like eating an 8 oz. bag of potato chips, and that's assuming your theater pops in the best oil available and you get it without the "buttery" topping.

Here's what we found when we sent samples of popcorn and toppings from the three largest theater chains to an independent lab for analysis. (Each gave us nutrition facts for its popcorn. But just to be sure, we analyzed samples from three different theaters for each chain. For two of the chains—Regal and AMC—we went to theaters in the Washington, D.C., area. For Cinemark, our samples came from Texas, Illinois, and Maryland.)



REGAL
ENTERTAINMENT
GROUP

WITH 548 theaters in 39 states plus the District of Columbia, Regal is the largest chain in the United States. It pops in coconut oil, which is 90 percent saturated. (In contrast, lard is 40 percent saturated.)

Translation: A "small" popcorn (that's about 11 cups' worth) with no buttery topping has 34 grams of saturated fat. So even if you split it with a friend (unlikely), you each get nearly a day's worth of artery paste. And it gets worse from there.

A "medium" (20 cups) or a "large" (also 20 cups) has 60 grams of sat fat. Of course, a large means a free refill (Yay!), so there's no limit to the damage you can do.

Suggestion: Move your cardiologist's phone number to your speed dial before the lights go down.

Just kidding. It takes years to clog those arteries...and years for your blood pressure to respond to the salt shock (550 milligrams of sodium—a third of a day's worth—for a small and 980 mg for a medium or large).

The calories, on the other hand, may show up much sooner...and where you least want them.

Budget 670 for a small and 1,200 for a medium or large. You could think of each small as a Pizza Hut Personal Pan Pepperoni Pizza and each medium or large as two. But the two pizzas pack "only" a day's worth of sat fat—nowhere near the three days' worth in a medium or large popcorn.

How can a medium and large at Regal each hold the same 20 cups of popcorn?

Simple. The taller medium comes in a bag with straight sides, while the squatter large comes in a tapered tub that's wider at the top (see photo). The tub sure looks like it holds more. Other than for the free refill (shudder), why else would moviegoers pay \$8 for a large (a medium is \$7)?

Photos: ©Valery Potapova/fotolia.com (top); Stephen Schmidt (bottom).



At Regal, a medium (left) and a large popcorn each has 1,200 calories and three days' worth of saturated fat.

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	REGAL (popped in coconut oil)	AMC (popped in coconut oil)	CINEMARK (popped in non-hydrogenated canola oil)
SMALL	<p>11 cups</p> <p>670 calories 34 g sat fat 550 mg sodium</p> <p>1 Tbs. "buttery" topping adds 130 calories 2 g sat fat 0 g trans fat</p>	<p>6 cups</p> <p>370 calories 20 g sat fat 210 mg sodium</p> <p>1 Tbs. "buttery" topping adds 120 calories 2 g sat fat 0 g trans fat</p>	<p>8 cups</p> <p>420 calories 2 g sat fat 690 mg sodium</p> <p>1 Tbs. "buttery" topping adds 130 calories 2 g sat fat 0 g trans fat</p> <p>1 Tbs. butter topping adds 130 calories 9 g sat fat 0.4 g trans fat</p>
MEDIUM	<p>20 cups</p> <p>1,200 calories 60 g sat fat 980 mg sodium</p> <p>1½ Tbs. "buttery" topping adds 200 calories 3 g sat fat 0 g trans fat</p>	<p>9 cups</p> <p>590 calories 33 g sat fat 330 mg sodium</p> <p>1½ Tbs. "buttery" topping adds 180 calories 3 g sat fat 0 g trans fat</p>	<p>14 cups</p> <p>760 calories 3 g sat fat 1,240 mg sodium</p> <p>1½ Tbs. "buttery" topping adds 200 calories 3 g sat fat 0 g trans fat</p> <p>1½ Tbs. butter topping adds 200 calories 14 g sat fat 0.6 g trans fat</p>
LARGE	<p>20 cups</p> <p>1,200 calories 60 g sat fat 980 mg sodium</p> <p>2 Tbs. "buttery" topping adds 260 calories 4 g sat fat 0 g trans fat</p>	<p>16 cups</p> <p>1,030 calories 57 g sat fat 580 mg sodium</p> <p>2 Tbs. "buttery" topping adds 240 calories 4 g sat fat 0 g trans fat</p>	<p>17 cups</p> <p>910 calories 4 g sat fat 1,500 mg sodium</p> <p>2 Tbs. "buttery" topping adds 260 calories 5 g sat fat 0 g trans fat</p> <p>2 Tbs. butter topping adds 260 calories 18 g sat fat 0.7 g trans fat</p>

Notes: Cup estimates based on 11 grams of popcorn per cup. Topping serving sizes for all chains based on Regal numbers. Daily limits for 2,000 cal: Sat Fat: 20 g, Sodium: 1,500 mg.

Another oopsy-daisy: According to Regal, a medium has 720 calories, while a large has 960 calories. Both are lower than our lab results. Oh well. What's an extra 200 to 500 calories when your snack hovers around the 1,000-calorie mark? They don't call them tubs for nothing.

Toppings: For customers who think plain popcorn isn't soaked in enough oil, Regal offers a "buttery" topping. According to Regal and the topping manufacturer, it adds 130 calories to a small, 200 calories to a medium, and 260 calories to a large.

We analyzed the topping to make sure that it had no trans fat. But we didn't check to see how much topping the concession staff at Regal—or any other chain—adds. Odds are, it varies. And odds are, it's more than what Regal claims.

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AMC, the nation's second-largest chain (with 307 theaters in 30 states and the District of Columbia), also pops in coconut oil. The only good news: AMC's popcorns aren't as super-sized as Regal's. But they're bigger than the company acknowledges.

According to AMC, a small popcorn contains 225 calories. In fact, the small AMC popcorns that we bought weighed about 50 percent more than the company claimed. Our AMC smalls contained 370 calories and 20 grams of saturated fat—about what you'd get from that classic healthy snack: eight pats of butter.

Based on what we were served, AMC lowballs its other sizes as well.

For example, the company's 430-calorie medium morphed into 590 calories and 33 grams of saturated fat. And the 660-calorie large became a 1,030-calorie behemoth with 57 grams of sat fat. It's like eating a pound of baby back ribs topped with a scoop of Häagen-Dazs ice cream (except for the extra day's worth of sat fat in the popcorn).

What's next: fun-house mirrors that make you look skinny on your way out of the theater?

Toppings: Fake-butter fans must love AMC. The chain lets patrons pump their own "buttery" topping. No skimpy tablespoon of extra fat on a small or two

COMBOS

A combo at Regal (medium popcorn plus medium soda) has 1,610 calories. That's like eating six scrambled eggs with cheddar cheese, four bacon strips, and four sausage links before the lights come up.



	Calories	Sat Fat (g)
REGAL		
1 medium popcorn, 1 medium soda	1,610	60
1 large popcorn, 2 medium sodas	2,020	60
AMC		
1 large popcorn, 1 large soda	1,440	57
1 large popcorn, 2 large sodas	1,850	57
CINEMARK		
1 large popcorn, 1 large soda	1,320	4
1 large popcorn, 2 large sodas	1,730	4

tablespoons on a large, like Regal claims to use. With 120 calories per tablespoon, you should be able to squeeze another 200 to 500 calories into the bucket of fat cells in your lap.



Cinemark, with 296 theaters in 39 states, deserves some applause. The nation's third largest chain pops in non-hydrogenated canola oil instead of coconut.

Assuming you add no "buttery" topping, your heart can escape a Cinemark popcorn relatively unscathed. Your belly (and blood pressure) won't be so lucky.

If you share an unbuttered (8-cup)

small with a fellow moviegoer, each of you will walk away with about 200 calories (seasoned with 340 milligrams of sodium).

That's the best you can expect from movie theater popcorn, unless you ask the theater to pop you a batch without salt. (All the Cinemark, AMC, and Regal locations we called said they would do that.)

A medium popcorn (14 cups) at Cinemark reaches 760 calories and a large (17 cups) hits 910 calories (and 1,500 mg of sodium—an entire day's quota). Since when is half-a-day's-calories' worth of corn, oil, and salt called a "snack"? Maybe since America started competing in the Sumo Belly-Lifting Olympics.

SODA



Small at **CINEMARK**



Small at **AMC**



Small at **REGAL**,
Medium at **AMC**
Medium at **CINEMARK**



Medium at **REGAL**,
Large at **AMC**
Large at **CINEMARK**



Large at **REGAL**

Notes: Ice takes up about a quarter of the cup. There are 4 grams of sugar in every teaspoon.

Toppings: Cinemark may use the healthiest popping oil, but you can still run into problems at the pump.

At some Cinemarks, the topping is essentially the same “buttery” non-hydrogenated soybean oil used by other chains. So for each tablespoon that you (or the servers) pour over your popcorn, you’re adding another 130 calories that (we’re guessing) you won’t burn by the end of the day.

At other Cinemarks (especially in the West), the topping is made from real butter. Would you add butter to your French fries?

Each tablespoon of the butter topping delivers 9 grams of saturated fat—half a day’s limit—plus 0.4 grams of naturally occurring trans fat, which will boost your LDL (“bad”) cholesterol as much as man-made trans does.

So get out the calculator...and that extra dose of Lipitor. You just turned your large popcorn into two Big Macs.

SODAS & COMBOS

A bag or tub of popcorn can make you thirsty, and theaters aren’t about to let their customers suffer. So they offer sodas to wash down the salt and oil.

A small ranges from 16 ounces (2 cups) at Cinemark to 32 ounces (4 cups) at Regal. Assume that about a quarter of it is filled with ice. Even so, you’re talking 150 to 300 calories’ worth of sugar (unless you get a diet soda or water).

A large is only for those who possess a reinforced bladder (or arrive with a supply of Depends). It ranges from 44 ounces (5½ cups) at Cinemark or AMC to 54 ounces (nearly 7 cups) at Regal. Okay, so you may not need an extra 400 to 500 calories—and 26 to 33 teaspoons of sugar—right now. But who knows? Maybe a famine is just around the corner.

To save you money (how thoughtful), theaters offer combos. For example, for a mere \$12, Regal hands you a medium popcorn and a medium soft drink, and AMC dishes up a large popcorn and a large soda. Where else can you be so distracted (by the movie) that you don’t realize you’ve just swallowed 1,400 to 1,600 calories?

A combo for two people is even more economical. At Regal (1 large popcorn and 2 medium sodas) and AMC (1 large popcorn and 2 large drinks), you pay about \$17 for roughly 2,000 calories. What a deal. You’ll still have money left over for dinner and dessert after the movie.

True, you might be a tad less hungry if you go back for a free refill. The problem is, you have to walk all the way to the concession stand for it. That’s dozens of steps!

Maybe someday theaters will have employees walk up and down the aisles offering free refills of popcorn and soda during the movie. In the meantime, they could at least offer bigger buckets. Maybe garbage bags would work. 🍿

CANDY

Theaters stock oversized packages of candy (usually 4 to 5 ounces) so you don’t find yourself halfway through a thriller with your mouth empty. (Heads up: the calories, saturated fat, and other numbers printed on the box are typically for a puny 1½-ounce serving, which you’ll probably polish off before the previews are over.)

An 8 oz. bag (1 cup) has as many calories (around 1,200) as a 16 oz. T-bone steak plus a buttered baked potato.

You can munch through a box of AirHeads, Sour Jacks, Jolly Rancher Gummies, or Welch’s Fruit Snacks for 300 to 400 empty sugar calories. What’s a movie without 11 to 17 teaspoons of sugar? (Don’t be fooled by the Fruit Snacks. They’re mostly sugar and grape juice concentrate.)

Another option: blow 400 to 500 calories *and* at least half a day’s sat fat on a box of Raisinets, Butterfinger Minis, Milk Duds, Sno-Caps, or other chocolate candies. Then there’s Reese’s Pieces: 1,160 calories, 35 grams of sat fat, and 30 teaspoons of sugar to go with the 1,200 calories and 60 grams of sat fat in your popcorn and the 500 calories and 33 teaspoons of sugar in your large drink. Urp!

	Calories	Sugar (grams)	Sat Fat (grams)
AirHeads Xtremes Sweetly Sour Belts (3 oz.)	300	45	0
Sour Jacks, Original (3.5 oz.)	300	48	0
Sour Patch, Watermelon (3.5 oz.)	370	64	0
Welch’s Fruit Snacks, Mixed Fruit (4.1 oz.)	370	66	0
Jolly Rancher Gummies (4.5 oz.)	390	72	0
Twizzlers (5 oz.)	460	59	0
Sour Patch Kids (5 oz.)	490	92	0
SweetTarts (6 oz.)	680	136	0
Nerds (7 oz.)	790	185	0
AirHeads (3.3 oz.)	360	51	3
Skittles, Original (4 oz.)	450	87	4
Skittles, Sour (3.6 oz.)	420	75	5
Junior Caramels (4.3 oz.)	540	69	7
Skittles, Crazy Cores (7.2 oz.)	830	156	7
Milk Duds (3 oz.)	370	44	8
Junior Mints XL (4.8 oz.)	570	107	8
Cookie Dough Bites, Mint (3.1 oz.)	400	42	10
Sun-Maid Milk Chocolate Raisins (3.5 oz.)	430	63	10
Butterfinger Minis (3.5 oz.)	450	45	10
Sno-Caps (3.1 oz.)	400	53	11
Cookie Dough Bites, Original (3.1 oz.)	420	42	11
Raisinets (3.5 oz.)	420	60	11
M&M’s, Milk Chocolate (3.4 oz.)	480	62	11
Buncha Crunch (3.2 oz.)	440	49	12
Goobers (3.5 oz.)	510	44	12
Whoppers (2.8 oz.)	350	48	13
M&M’s, Peanut (5.3 oz.)	790	79	16
Reese’s Pieces (4 oz.)	580	61	20
Reese’s Pieces (8 oz.)	1,160	122	35

Source: company information. Daily limits for 2,000 cal: Sat Fat: 20 g, Sugar: 40 g (10 tsp.).