

Eating Out Isn't Eating Right

Almost 50% of the total American food budget is now spent in fast food or sit-down restaurants

More and more, the economic stability of the American household rests precariously on the presence of two working parents, or on a single working parent, working long days sandwiched by long drive times between home and work. While stuck in traffic, what tired parent can resist the ever-present fast food joints with their convenient drive-through windows? The kids will laud the parent as a hero, and the parent will have more time to relax without worrying about preparing a meal or cleaning up. Everybody wins, except nobody wins in the long run.

One out of five meals eaten in the US today is a fast food meal

The average child eats over 200 fast-food or restaurant meals per year

No gene truly exists that only allows one to like fast food

However, we are biologically programmed to like the taste of fat, sugar, and salt. We are also biologically programmed to be drawn to a good deal!

With few exceptions, restaurant foods are higher in portion sizes, calories, salt, fat, and saturated fats than foods prepared at home

Few restaurants offer kid-friendly meals and beverages. Most kids' meals include no fruit or vegetable (except high-fat, nutrient-poor French fries), and beverage options are restricted to "liquid candy" soda pop or high-fat milk.

What Can Parents Do?

- Limit fast food to no more than once a month
- Limit sit-down restaurants to no more than twice a month
- Take home a portion of the meal. Making two meals out of the oversized restaurant portion makes for a better value!
- Ask for carrots or celery sticks as soon as you sit down, to keep the kids occupied, or go to the salad bar as soon as possible to select some vegetables for everyone to munch on.
- Order orange juice, water, or low-fat (1% or skim) milk for kids to drink
- Ask the restaurant manager to offer sugar-free, caffeine-free soft drink options for kids
- Consider writing a letter to the manager, advocating for kids' meals with smaller portion sizes, lower salt levels, more healthful side options (baked or roasted potatoes, steamed vegetables, fresh fruit, low-fat yogurt topped with fruit or low-fat granola), more healthful entree options (grilled chicken or fish rather than battered and fried), and whole wheat breads for the grilled cheese sandwich or the hot dog/hamburger bun. Encourage the restaurant to print nutrition information on the kids' menu.

Super-sized fast food and restaurant meals are not entirely to blame for the supersizing of American children, but they are at least part of the problem. Studies have shown that on days where a child eats a fast-food or restaurant meal, they consume on average 400 calories more than they need in a day. Over time, this adds up to a lot of extra weight.

Did You Know?

The Nutrition Labeling and Education Act of 1990, which required comprehensive consistent food labeling on almost all packaged foods sold at supermarkets, exempted restaurants. Congressional attempts to pass menu labeling acts have since failed.

Some restaurants do provide brochures or posters with nutrition information, though most do not, and almost none put such information on the menus.

Write to your congress-member, and ask them to support legislation that would require that consumers receive information about the nutritional content of restaurant foods at the point of decision-making, including on the menu or menu boards. Such information should include calories, serving size, and salt and saturated fat content.