

Burger Battles:

A new study shows fast-food advertising to kids is on the rise

There's a huge food fight going on across the United States! On one side are the fast-food giants- Wendy's, Burger King, McDonald's, KFC, and others. On the other side are many health experts who say that too much fast food is ruining the health of kids. They say most fast food has too many calories; too much sodium, a chemical element in salt; and too much saturated fat for kids to eat more than just once in a while.

Despite such warnings, kids are eating more fast food than ever. That's the conclusion of a team at Yale University. The team, led by Jennifer Harris, spent a year studying what kids ate at fast-food restaurants.

The Yale team discovered that one-third of U.S. kids eat some type of fast food every day. It also found that 84 percent of parents take their 2- to 11-year-old kids out to eat fast food every week.

To Harris, the findings amount to a serious health crisis for kids and teens in the United States.

"There is a lot of research showing that eating fast food is harmful to young people's health, increasing the rate of obesity," Harris told *WR News*. "The number of teens who are overweight has tripled since 1980, and the number of overweight kids younger than 13 has more than doubled during the same period."

Childhood obesity is known to increase the chances of heart disease and diabetes later in life. Diabetes is a disorder in which the body doesn't produce enough insulin. That is a hormone that helps the body use the sugar in food for energy.

Big Advertising

If eating a lot of fast food is bad for a person's health, why are so many kids rushing off to McDonald's, Burger King, KFC, Taco Bell, Pizza Hut, and Wendy's? The restaurants all have tasty, low-cost food, for sure. But Harris says that advertising also plays a big role.

"The companies put out a lot of ads ... directed toward kids," she says.

According to the report, 6- to 11-year-olds saw 3.5 ads each day. Most of them appear on television, but many now also appear on the Internet on kids' sites, says Harris.



C. J. Burton/Corbis

Making healthy food choices is not always easy.

In 2006, the major fast-food companies signed a voluntary agreement to help promote their healthier menu selections. To promote is to highlight.

In an e-mail to *WR News*, Neil Golden, McDonald's senior vice president and chief marketing officer, said that his company has kept that pledge. "We primarily advertise our popular 375-calorie four piece Chicken McNugget Happy Meal, which includes Apple Dippers, low-fat caramel dip, and a jug of 1 percent low-fat milk," he wrote. "We ... remain committed to offering our customers a wide variety of quality food [choices that include] fruit, juice, and dairy options in our Happy Meals."

The Spirit of the Agreement

Harris believes that fast-food companies need to do more. "If they had done what they said they were going to do," she told *WR News*, "they would show only Apple Dippers and milk in their advertising to children. ... The ads usually only show the [Happy Meal] box or the toy that comes with the Happy Meal."

Once kids are in the restaurant, she says, more often than not they buy Happy Meals that contain fries, not Apple Dippers. "Parents have to specifically ask for the healthy alternative," she says. "And often they just accept what's in the box."



Chew On This!

Fast-food restaurants offer a lot of choices, so it's easy to eat healthy on the go. How would you mix and match the foods below to create a healthy fast-food meal?

Fast Facts:



In 1972, people in the United States spent \$3 billion a year on fast food. In 2009, they spent more than \$110 billion.

McDonald's has more than 31,000 restaurants in 119 countries on six continents. Burger King has more than 12,000 restaurants in 73 countries. KFC has 16,264 restaurants in 108 countries, serving about 12 million people.

KFC was the first U.S. fast-food chain in China, in 1992. Today, KFC is the largest and fastest growing fast-food chain in China, with more than 3,000 restaurants in more than 650 cities.