

# Eating Fast Foods... The Healthy Way

By Michelle Mirizzi, MS, Registered Dietician

As a parent, you have a strong influence over how much fast food your child eats. Find out how to set some guidelines to follow when eating out that will teach them how to make healthy choices as adults.

In the 'olden days' there were no video games or televisions. People ate all their meals at home or sometimes at another family's home. All the food was prepared from scratch and a lot was home grown. Most families would only go out to eat if it was a very special occasion. Times have changed and now we are often referred to as the 'fast food nation.' Everyday, one out of every four children eat fast food and nearly half of all of us eat fast food more than once a week. We do this primarily because of convenience and because it's less expensive than going to a restaurant. Let's face it, children love fast food meals because it comes in a colorful box, it's served quickly and, most importantly, it comes with a toy!

Fast food chains spend a huge amount of money on marketing to get the attention of children. They know that most people form their eating habits as children so they try to shape these 'future customers' as best as they can. They spend so much money on marketing to children that according to Eric Schlosser, author of the book "Fast Food Nation", 96% of children can identify Ronald McDonald. The only other fictional character that is better identified by children is Santa Claus!

Why do we as parents visit these places? Well, our lives are more hectic than ever between school, sports, work and friends. Who has time to think about what to eat? The good news is that you can still enjoy an occasional meal from fast food restaurants by learning how to make smart choices. As a parent, you have a strong influence over how much your child eats. Setting some guidelines to follow when eating out will teach them how to make healthy choices as adults.

There are some tricks that can help make any fast food meal better for you and your family. Follow these tips to cut down on fat, sodium, sugar, overall calories and make your meal healthier:

- If you are ordering á la Carte items on the menu, find out if there is a child's size available. Another option is to order the regular size and split the order and share it. Avoid ordering extra large portions just because they are a deal! These deals usually have the words jumbo, giant, super sized or deluxe in the name.
- Don't be shy about making substitutions! Children love kid's meals because it comes with a toy and it is usually in a cool looking box. Let them order it but ask to make substitutions for the fries and soda if possible. Many restaurants will offer milk or water as a beverage and apple slices instead of fries.
- Talk to your child before ordering a meal and give them a choice of milk, juice or water (make sure it is low fat milk or 100% fruit juice.) Explain to them that soda is high in empty calories that will just fill up their tummies.

- Let your child know that they can ask for items prepared a specific way. For example, salad dressing on the side, baked or grilled instead of fried, brown rice instead of white rice.
- Finally, set a good example by ordering a healthy meal for yourself.

### **What Can Parents Do?**

By learning how the food is prepared, you will be able to make healthier choices ordering from a menu:

- Order foods that are not breaded or fried because they are higher in fat and calories. Foods that are breaded and deep fried include: chicken nuggets, fried chicken, fried fish sandwiches, onion rings and french fries.
- Order foods that are prepared by being steamed, broiled, grilled, poached, or roasted.
- Have gravy, sauces and dressings served on the side so you can control the amount you eat.
- Use salsa and mustard instead of mayonnaise.
- Use non-fat milk or low fat milk instead of whole milk or heavy cream.
- Order a salad with 'lite' or non-fat dressing instead of regular dressing.
- Choose a regular, single patty hamburger without mayonnaise and cheese.

Over the last few years, many chain restaurants have been adding healthier menu options. They also started providing nutrition information for all the foods on the menu, but you usually need to ask for it. Try checking their website as well for additional information.

Hamburger fast food restaurants are the most popular with children. However, other options are available such as Asian food, sandwiches, or Mexican grills. Keep in mind that every fast food restaurant has both healthy and less-healthy choices. Here are some pointers to remember that can help you make better choices when eating out at various fast food places:

### **Mexican Food:**

- Choose grilled soft tacos or burritos instead of a crispy shell or gordita-type burritos.
- Black beans are a better choice because they have less fat than refried beans.
- Ahhh, the Mexican condiments! Salsa is low in calories and fat and it makes a great substitute for sour cream, guacamole and cheese.

### **Deli Sandwiches:**

- Choose lean meats such as chicken breast, lean ham or roast beef, instead of salami or bacon.
- Ask for 100% whole wheat bread for sandwiches. Skip the croissants and biscuits because they are high in fat.
- Add low fat salad dressings instead of special sauces or mayonnaise.
- Choose baked chips or pretzels instead of regular potato chips.

### **Asian Food:**

- Steamed jasmine rice has more nutrients and less calories than fried rice.
- Stir fried, steamed, roasted or broiled dishes are healthier choices than battered or deep fried.
- Sauces such as low sodium soy sauce, rice wine vinegar, wasabi, or ginger are better choices than sweet and sour sauce or coconut milk.

It's OK to enjoy fast food once in a while, but try to limit the visits to no more than twice a month. An average meal at a fast food restaurant has around 1000 calories and does not have the vitamins, minerals and other important nutrients that your child needs to grow healthy and strong.

While fast food consumption has greatly increased over the years there are several contributing factors why childhood obesity is becoming more and more prevalent. While all the above information is important, we need to keep things in perspective by understanding that the weight epidemic in this country is because of how much food children eat, rather than what food children eat.

If your family is going to have fast food for one meal, just make sure the other meals that day contain healthier foods like fruits and vegetables. Perhaps you could take an afternoon with your child and prepare a few homemade meals in advance that can be served quickly to avoid the temptation of getting fast food too often while at the same time teaching them some simple food preparation steps. Either way, just remember, it is not that difficult to eat healthy even when you don't have much time.