

Report written by Margo G. Wootan, D.Sc., Ameena Batada, Dr.P.H., and Elizabeth Marchlewicz, CSPI, and in cooperation with the California Center for Public Health Advocacy.

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For more information, model policies, and other materials, contact:

Margo G. Wootan, D.Sc.
Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI)

Phone: 202-777-8352 Fax: 202-265-4954

Email: nutritionpolicy@cspinet.org

Kids' Meals: Obesity on the Menu is available on line free of charge at www.cspinet.org/kidsmeals>

Introduction

Kids are eating out more than ever before. Eating out accounts for one-third of children's daily caloric intake, twice the amount consumed away from home 30 years ago. Children consume almost twice as many calories when they eat a meal at a restaurant compared to a meal at home, and they get more saturated fat and less fiber and calcium than in home-cooked meals. This report summarizes the findings from an evaluation of children's menus at the most popular chain restaurant in the U.S.



Methods

We assessed the nutritional quality of children's meals at the 25 largest (by revenue in 2007)³ chain restaurants in the U.S. Of the top 25 restaurant chains, 6 (24%) did not have dedicated children's menus: Starbucks, Pizza Hut, Domino's Pizza, Dunkin' Donuts, Tim Horton's, and 7-Eleven. Of the remaining 19 restaurant chains, 13 (68%) provided adequate nutrition information for the evaluation of nutritional quality; Applebee's, TGIFriday's, Outback Steakhouse, Olive Garden, Red Lobster, and IHOP did not disclose nutrition information. Nutrition information for each restaurant was obtained in June 2008 from the restaurant's website or from corporate headquarters.^a

We evaluated the nutritional quality of all possible children's meal combinations (each possible combination of each entree, side item, and beverage from each restaurant's children's menu). For example, a hamburger, fries and soft drink^b was considered one possible combination; a hamburger, fries and low-fat milk was considered another, etc. Each meal was

^a If no brand was specified and information could not be obtained from the restaurant's webpage or corporate headquarters, an estimate of a similar item was made from the U.S, Department of Agriculture's *What's in the Foods You Eat* Source Tool 3.0 or a restaurant with a similar item on its menu.

^b At each restaurant, nutrition information for Sprite was used in the meal combinations with a soft drink.

evaluated against a set of nutrition standards developed by a panel of nutrition and health experts (see Table 1).⁴ Those nutrition standards were adapted from the National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity's *Model Local School Wellness Policies on Physical Activity and Nutrition,*⁵ which were developed and supported by more than 50 health, nutrition, and education organizations, and are based on key nutrition recommendations from the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.⁶

Table 1. Nutrition Standards for Assessing Nutritional Quality of Children's Meals^a

Foods	
Nutrient	Standards
Calories	No more than one-third of the daily calorie requirement for the average child in the age range targeted by the marketing ^b
Fat	No more than 35% of calories, cexcluding nuts, seeds, and peanut or other nut butters
Saturated plus trans fat	No more than 10% of calories ^c
Added sugars	No more than 35% added sugars by weight ^{d, e}
Sodium	No more than 230 mg per serving of chips, crackers, cheeses, baked goods, French fries, and other snack items ^f No more than 480 mg per serving for soups, cereal, pastas, and meats ^g No more than 600 mg for pizza, sandwiches, and main dishes ^g No more than 770 mg for meals ^h
Nutrient content	Contains one or more of the following: 1) 10% of the DV (naturally or from fortification) of vitamins A or C, calcium, iron, or fiber, 2) half a serving of fruit or vegetable, or 3) 51% or more (by weight) whole grain ingredients
<u>Beverages</u>	Beverages assessed as being of poor nutritional quality: -Soft drinks; sports drinks; and sweetened iced teas -Fruit-based drinks that contain less than 50% real fruit juice <i>or</i> that contain added sweeteners -Beverages containing caffeine, excluding low-fat or fat-free chocolate milk (which contain trivial amounts of caffeine) -High-fat (whole or 2%) milk

a. From Guidelines for Responsible Food Marketing to Children (http://www.cspinet.org/marketingguidelines.pdf)

b. For this study, we used one-third of the calorie requirements for 4 to 8 year olds, which is 430 calories for all children's meals except Burger King Big Kids Meals and McDonald's Mighty Kids Meals. For those meals, we used one-third of the calorie requirements for 9 to 13 year olds, which is 570 calories. Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee. "The Report of the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee on Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2005." (http://www.health.gov/DietaryGuidelines/dga2005/report/default.htm)

c. Based on Dietary Guidelines for Americans (http://www.health.gov/DietaryGuidelines/dga2005/document/default.htm)

d. Based on U.S. Department of Agriculture's Healthier U.S. School Challenge (http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/healthierus/index.html)

e. Total sugars was used if added sugars could not be determined

f. Based on one-tenth of Dietary Reference Intakes (DRI) Tolerable Upper (daily) Intake Level (UL) for sodium

g. Based on Food and Drug Administration (FDA) definition of 'healthy' for food labels

h. Based on one-third of Dietary Reference Intakes (DRI) Tolerable Upper (daily) Intake Level (UL) for sodium

Children's Entrees, Side Items, and Beverages

Children's menus at the largest chain restaurants are dominated by burgers, chicken nuggets, macaroni and cheese, French fries, and soft drinks (Tables 2a -2c). The most common entree on children's menus is fried chicken (89% of restaurants), followed by burgers (63%), grilled cheese (37%), and macaroni and cheese (37%). However, some healthier options are available at restaurants, such as grilled chicken, seafood, and some sandwiches.

Table 2a. Children's Entrees Available at Top Chain Restaurants (n=19)

Entree	Restaurants Where	Entree Is Available
	#	%
Fried Chicken	17	89
Burgers	12	63
Grilled Cheese	7	37
Pasta/Macaroni with Cheese Sauce	7	37
Grilled Chicken	5	26
Pizza	4	21
French Toast	4	21
Hot Dog/Corn Dog	3	16
Ribs	3	16
Tex Mex	3	16
Pasta with Marinara Sauce	3	16
Sandwiches	2	11
Pancakes	2	11
Egg Entree	2	11
Seafood	1	5
Other	2	11





Entrees and side items on the Denny's children's menu (above) and taco from Taco Bell (left). French fries and other fried potatoes are the most common side items on children's menus (84% of restaurants). Fruit is also a common side item (58%), as are vegetables (42%).

Table 2b. Children's <u>Side Items</u> Available at Top Chain Restaurants (n=19)

Side Dishes	Restaurants Whe	ere Side Item is Available
	#	%
French Fries and Other Fried Potatoes	16	84
Fruit	11	58
Vegetables (other than potatoes)	8	42
Desserts	8	42
Potatoes (other)	4	21
Chips/Crackers	4*	21
Biscuits	2	11
Rice	2	11
Yogurt	1	5
Macaroni and Cheese	1	5
Plain Pasta	1	5
Whole Grain Wild Rice	1	5



French fries from Dairy Queen (left) and yogurt from Wendy's (below).



^{*} Includes 1 chain, KFC, that no longer offers Baked Cheetos as a side item with their children's meals.

Soft drinks are by far the most popular beverage offered with children's meals; they are offered with children's meals at 95% of the largest chain restaurants. Subway is the only restaurant that does not offer soft drinks with its children's meal options. Juice is offered at two-thirds (68%) of restaurants. While milk is offered as an option with children's meals at two-thirds of large chain restaurants (68%), about half (53%) offer the higher fat types of milk (whole or 2%). Milk is by far the largest source of saturated fat – the kind of fat that causes heart disease – in children's diets. Offering low-fat milk, as 47% of the top chain restaurants do, is an important way to help protect children's heart-heath, as well as their bone health to prevent osteoporosis.

Table 2c. Children's <u>Beverages</u> Available at Top Chain Restaurants (n=19*)

Beverages	Restaurants Where Beverage is Available		
	#	%	
Soft Drinks	18	95%	
Juice (100%)	13	68%	
High-fat Milk (whole and 2%)	10	53%	
Low-fat Milk (1% or fat free)	9	47%	
Slushies	1	5%	

^{*}Denny's lists beverage options on the children's menu but they must be purchased separately.



Sonic offers Slushies as a beverage option.

Nutritional Quality of Children's Meals

Despite the fact that obesity rates have tripled in children over the last two decades, chain restaurants continue to offer primarily high calorie meals for children; 93% of children's meals are high in calories (Table 3).

Table 3. Nutritional Quality of Children's Meals at Largest Chain Restaurants (n=13)

Rank (by revenue of chain)	Restaurant	Meal/Combo Name	Total Number of Meal Combos	Meals that Exceed Calorie Limit (>430 calories)	
				#	%
2	KFC*	Kids Laptop Meal	440	440	100
13	Sonic	Wacky Pack	48	48	100
18	Jack in the Box	Kids Meal	24	24	100
24	Chick-fil-A	Kid's Meal	20	20	100
8	Taco Bell	Kid's Meal	3	3	100
12	Chili's	Pepper Pals	700	658	94
7	Wendy's	Kids' Meal	30	28	93
1	McDonald's	Happy Meal & Mighty Kids Meal	40	37	93
3	Burger King**	Kids Meal & Big Kids Meal	49	45	92
22	Dairy Queen	Deeqs Kids Meal	18	16	89
15	Arby's	Kids Meal	32	22	69
22	Denny's***	The D-Zone at Denny's	52	31	60
5	Subway	Fresh Fit for Kids	18	6	33
otal /Averag	ge		1474	1378	93

^{*}For KFC, the items offered for the children's menu vary between outlets. Since our data was collected, KFC has discontinued Baked Cheetos.

^{**}Burger King's new children's meal (macaroni and cheese, apple fries, and 1% milk) was introduced after our data collection was completed and was not included; this meal would qualify as a healthier children's meal.

^{***}Includes both breakfast and lunch/dinner combos and beverages are not included as a part of children's meals. They must be purchased separately.

In addition, 45% of children's meals exceed recommendations for saturated and trans fat, which can raise blood cholesterol levels and increase heart disease risk. One-quarter of children ages five to 10 years show early warning signs for heart disease, such as elevated blood cholesterol or high blood pressure. Atherosclerosis (clogged arteries) begins in childhood. Autopsy studies of 15 to 19 year olds have found that all have fatty streaks in more than one artery, and about 10% have advanced fibrous plaques. Increased blood pressure due to sodium intake also starts in childhood. Yet, 86% of children's meals are high in sodium.

Restaurants do serve some healthier meals for children. Table 4 (next page) lists meals that meet our nutrition criteria. Ideally, companies would offer and market to children only the most healthful foods and beverages, especially those that are typically under-consumed, such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy products. However, given how far restaurants have to go to reach that ideal, we recommend more practical nutrition standards; standards that will lead to improvements in children's diets compared to what they are now and that could help children meet the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* (i.e., that help them to limit their intake of calories, saturated and trans fat, sodium, and refined sugars and with more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and low-fat dairy products).

Children's Menu HALL OF SHAME



<u>Chili's</u> country-fried chicken crispers, cinnamon apples, & chocolate milk

<u>Chili's</u> cheese pizza, homestyle fries, & lemonade





KFC's popcorn chicken, baked beans, biscuit, fruit punch, & Teddy Grahams

Burger King's double cheeseburger, fries, & chocolate milk





Sonic's grilled cheese, fries, & slushie

Table 4. Healthier Children's Meals at Top Chain Restaurants

Restaurant	Meals That Met Nutrition Standards # (%)	
Subway	8 (44%)	- Ham mini sub with juice box and apple slices or raisins
		- Roast beef mini sub and juice box with any side (apple slices, raisins, yogurt)
		- Turkey mini sub and juice box with any side (apple slices, raisins, yogurt)
Chili's	3 (<1%)	- Grilled chicken sandwich with apple juice and corn kernels or mandarin oranges or pineapple
Denny's*	2 (4%)	- Pancakes without meat, with maple syrup
		- Macaroni and cheese with grapes
Arby's	2 (6%)	- Popcorn chicken or Jr. roast beef sandwich with fruit cup and fruit juice

^{*}At Denny's beverages are sold separately, thus nutrition totals for meals do not include beverages.

Recommendations

The overwhelming majority of children's meals available at the largest chain restaurants are too high in calories (93% of meals). In addition, many are high in saturated fat (45%) and sodium (86%). Entrees are commonly fried chicken or burgers served with fries and a soft drink. There are some healthier meals, entrees, side items, and beverages. However, parents have to navigate a minefield of calories, fat, and salt to find them. Chain restaurants should reformulate their existing menu items to reduce the calories, saturated and trans fat, and sodium and add more healthy options like fruits, vegetables, and whole grains to make it easier for families to choose healthier options when they eat out.

Restaurants also should make fruit or vegetables and low-fat milk or water the default side dishes instead of French fries and soda for children's meals. Disney is having great success with this approach in its theme parks. It has found that

more than 70% of parents stick with the healthy options for kids' meals when they are the default offering on the menu. McDonald's, Denny's, and other restaurants should do the same.

Chain restaurants also should provide nutrition information on menus and menu boards, as is required by menu labeling policies passed in New York City, San Francisco, Multnomah County (Portland, OR), and other localities and like the policies that have been introduced in California, New York State, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and 20 other states and localities.

Without calorie information available on menus and menu boards, it can be difficult for parents to tell which options are healthier. Only one in ten people can identify the healthier option among a few choices from popular restaurants. For example, at Chili's, it may surprise some parents that the Chicken Crispers (590 calories) on the children's menu have over 200 more calories than the Rib Basket (370 calories) and the Cinnamon Apples (210 calories) have more calories than the Mashed Potatoes (190 calories).

Six of the top 25 restaurant chains with children's meals provide no nutrition information at all. The chain restaurants that do provide nutrition

3.19 4.19 2.89 4.99 2.69 1.99 137 1.49 1.69 1.99 Cheese Pizza serves two 2.99 Pepperoni Pizza serves two 911 7.19 7.79 751 S'mores for two Peanut Butter & Jelly 560 3.79

Cosi menu board with calorie information in New York City. Parents don't have to guess that the peanut butter & jelly sandwich (560 calories) has more calories than the grilled cheese sandwich (357 calories).

information provide it in ways that are not easy for people to find and use when ordering in restaurants.



in New York City, where menu labeling is required.

Who Would Guess?

Calorie Comparisons on Children's Menus

At <u>Dairy Queen</u>, the **cheese quesadilla** has *170* calories, compared to the **grilled cheese sandwich**, which has *320* calories.

At <u>KFC</u>, the **extra crispy drumstick** (160 calories) has fewer calories than the **popcorn chicken** (290 calories).

At <u>Chili's</u>, the **mandarin oranges** (70 calories) have a third of the calories of the **cinnamon apples** (210 calories).

At <u>Subway</u>, the **raisins** (140 calories) have four times the calories of the **apple slices** (35 calories).

When restaurants provide nutrition information, it is usually on websites. That means people have to go home, log on to the Internet, and study restaurant websites before going out to eat. If parents had that much time, they would just cook dinner. People eat out on the run and for convenience. Websites are not easy to use and most importantly the information is not in the restaurants where people are placing their orders.

Some restaurants provide nutrition information on tray liners or fast food packages, like McDonald's does on the *bottom* of Happy Meal boxes. However, people don't see that information until after they order. Other restaurants have posters or brochures in their stores, but they are difficult, if not impossible for people to read, understand, and utilize, especially for customers in fast-food

restaurants who visit such an outlet because they want to choose and purchase their food quickly.

A large exit interview survey of over 7,000 diners at a random sample of 275 chain restaurants conducted by the New York City department of health found that fewer than 5% of customers reported seeing calorie information in those restaurants that provided it via websites, brochures, posters, and kiosks.¹³ The study also found that Subway customers who saw nutrition information in the restaurant purchased meals with an average of 52 fewer calories than people who did not see the information.

Also, providing nutrition information on menus and menu boards creates a common and effective standard for providing nutrition information that consumers can rely on, find, and use when they are in chain restaurants. People should

not have to study a time-consuming and complicated nutrition brochure or hunt around to find nutrition information on a kiosk, table tent, poster back by the restrooms, or a tray liner.

The chain restaurant industry claims restaurants need flexibility in how they provide nutrition information. Supposedly different methods would work best in different restaurants. Yet, every restaurant uses menus and menu boards to list prices for their foods. There seems to be no need for flexibility there.

Burger King has made it clear that "menus and menu boards are among the most important ways that restaurants communicate with their customers." Only when Burger King and other restaurants move their prices from the menu board to a brochure by the cash register should legislatures consider listing calories there too.

For more on menu labeling, visit www.menulabeling.org.

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