

Nutritious fast-food kids' meals are scarce, researchers find

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Only 3 percent of kids' meals served at fast-food restaurants met federal dietary guidelines in the first study to examine the nutrient quality of such meals in a major U.S. metropolitan market.

Michigan State University's Sharon Hoerr, a food science and human nutrition researcher with the Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station, teamed up with economist Sharon O'Donnell and pediatrician Jason Mendoza from Baylor College of Medicine in Houston to assess the nutritional status of kids' meals in the Houston market.

The small percentage of meals that did meet dietary guidelines included fruit as a side dish and milk, and nearly all were deli-sandwich meals. They also had about one-third the fat, one-sixth the added sugars, twice the iron and three times the amount of vitamin A and calcium as did meals not meeting the criteria.

"This report is the first to characterize and compare the nutrient quality of all combinations of fast-food kids' meals in a major metropolitan market," Hoerr said. "Because 25 percent of children aged 4 to 8 years consume fast food on a typical day, the diet quality of kids' meals offered by fast-food companies contributes significantly to their overall health and well-being.

"Two trends motivate the need for an evaluation of the nutrient quality of fast-food kids' meals: the increased prevalence of childhood obesity and the amount of food consumed away from home."

The team assessed the quality of kids' meals in the fourth largest U.S. city by using nutrient values provided by the major fast food companies, the seven nutrient criteria from the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and dietary guidelines for sodium, fiber, added sugar and trans fat.

"We chose Houston because its fast-food restaurants include 12 of the 13 national and regional fast-food companies, represented by 477 restaurants that sell kids meals," O'Donnell said. "Virtually every meal combination is offered in this market, so it provides a pretty comprehensive snapshot of what's out there."

Of the meals that did not meet the NSLP guidelines, more than 65 percent exceeded guidelines for total fat, 75 percent were deficient in calcium, 82 percent were deficient in iron and 85 percent were deficient in vitamin A.

The choice of main entree by itself didn't influence the nutrient content of typical meals studied, the group found, but side choices did. Raisins appeared to be the most nutritious fruit side, due to their high iron content.

"This suggests that parents should carefully read the nutrition information to determine what is included in these meals," Hoerr said. "Sparing use of dipping sauces and other condiments will also help to keep sodium, added sugars and fat low."

Although only a small percentage of the meals met NSLP guidelines, researchers believe fast-food kids' meals can be designed to taste good and meet a basic level of nutrient quality.

"Fast-food companies are not required to produce meals that meet the nutrient protocol of the NSLP, so finding even a small percentage of

meals that met the protocol is encouraging," Mendoza said. "Further, 42 percent of all the meal combinations in the study met four or more of the criteria."

Hoerr and her colleagues agree it is the responsibility of the restaurant industry to develop and market more nutritious kids' meal options and for parents to choose healthy kids' meals for their children.

"Through public policy efforts and purchasing choices, parents, physicians, consumer groups, policymakers and public health professionals can deliver a strong, united message to fast-food companies that kids' meals are most desirable when they are nutritious as well as tasty," Hoerr said.

The study, "Nutrient Quality of Fast Food Kids Meals," was recently published in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* (Volume 88: 1388-1395), and is available online at www.ajcn.org .

Source: Michigan State University

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