

# Resolved to lose weight in 2011? skip the 'Value Meals'

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Researchers find that most diners don't realize they end up eating larger amounts of unhealthy food when they order combination menu items.

For those of you who resolve to lose weight this new year, here's a tip: skip the bundled "value [meals](#)" offered by fast-food restaurants.

These meals add more than just fries and a [soft drink](#) to cost-conscious consumers' meals; they also provide more calories than diners might expect.

That's the conclusion of research by Richard Staelin from Duke University's Fuqua School of Business and Kathryn M. Sharpe at the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business, who studied consumers' purchase patterns and eating behavior when presented with bundled and á la carte options from fast-food menus. They found that most diners don't realize they end up eating larger amounts of [unhealthy food](#) when they order combination menu items.

Sharpe's and Staelin's findings, published in the fall issue of the *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, indicate consumers respond positively to the perceived cost-savings and the simplified ordering process of a value meal versus á la carte options. These findings occur even when there is no cost savings associated with choosing the combo meal.

"The perceived value of a bundled meal encourages consumers to super-

size their orders," Staelin said. "Our study found 26 percent of participants increased the size of the meal bundle when given the combo meal option, consuming more than 100 additional [calories](#) per meal compared to a la carte menu items at the same prices."

The research surveyed 215 U.S. adults over the age of 21 who indicated they ate at a fast-food restaurant at least once a month. Participants were selected from a demographically diverse sample of the U.S. population.

The study first asked participants to imagine they were traveling on a cross-country road trip and stopping at nine different fast-food outlets. For each hypothetical outlet, participants viewed pictures of the types of menu items they could choose (entrees, drinks and [fries](#)) and were shown the amount they would have spent on their selected meals.

In addition to the imaginary road trip, participants were offered further meal choices with varying portion sizes and item combinations for a total of 33 meal selection options.

Staelin and Sharpe believe policy options, such as a tax on soft drinks and other foods, will not induce consumers to substantially reduce their consumption of unhealthy foods.

The researchers recommend implementing size standards and reducing drink and side-item portion sizes within the combo meal option, which will decrease calorie consumption.

**More information:** [www.atypon-link.com/AMA/doi/pdf/10.1509/jppm.29.2.170](http://www.atypon-link.com/AMA/doi/pdf/10.1509/jppm.29.2.170)

Provided by Duke University

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