

# Most kids' meals still far from healthful, group warns

April 13 2013, by Sandra Pedicini

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Even though children's nutrition has received lots of attention the past few years, you're still more likely to find chicken fingers and fries on kids' menus than wraps and salads.

Ninety-seven percent of major restaurant-chain children's meals were deemed unhealthful in a recent report by the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a consumer-advocacy group.

"I think what most restaurants have done is just add one or two meals that meet [nutrition standards](#) and left the rest of the menu very unhealthy," said Margo Wootan, [nutrition policy](#) director for the Washington-based organization. "They're still serving up the same old junk they always have."

With Americans spending nearly half of their food budgets on eating out, restaurants have been under increasing pressure from government and health advocates to make meals more healthful, especially for [youngsters](#). Restaurants say they are making steady progress.

But kids are growing out of these meals earlier, and many parents aren't exactly clamoring for fewer calories, less salt and more vegetables. And that's why many restaurants are making token changes rather than substantial ones, some experts say.

"There's always been this mentality that people don't go out to eat healthy," said Julie Casey, an Orlando consultant who helps restaurants

make themselves more child-friendly.

Anna Hancy of Orlando agreed with that last week as her 3-year-old daughter, Henley, ate chicken nuggets and fries at Chick-fil-A.

"It's kind of a splurge," Hancy said. "It's not the most nutritious meal she'll eat this week. She's also 3 and very picky, and it's something she will eat."

Chick-fil-A offers a variety of sides for children, including applesauce and fresh fruit. Last year, it introduced grilled chicken nuggets.

But last week during lunchtime in an Orlando Chick-fil-A, children were eating fried nuggets, not grilled ones, which last year made up just one-half of a percent of the chain's overall sales.

The healthier nuggets were never meant to generate blockbuster sales, spokesman Mark Baldwin said in an email, but "we felt it was our responsibility to offer a grilled version of our nuggets as a healthier alternative for our nutrition-minded customers."

"(Restaurants) make more money selling junk food," said Marion Nestle, a New York University nutrition and public-health professor and author of "What to Eat," in an email. "Until that problem is addressed, I don't see things changing."

Wootan suggested chains should put more energy into making healthier fare "something more interesting than a plain grilled piece of chicken."

Her group's study looked at every combination of entrees, sides and drinks for America's biggest chains. One was based on how many met the standards established by a panel of nutritionists for the study. Another was based on how many met less-stringent standards in a

restaurant-industry program called Kids LiveWell.

CSPI's criteria included having no more than 430 calories, 35 percent of them from fat, and 770 mg of salt. It also docked meal combinations with sugar-sweetened drinks. Kids LiveWell standards are similar but allow 600 calories.

Three percent of restaurants' meals met CSPI's standards. Fewer than one out of 10 met the KidsLive Well Standards.

McDonald's has cut the size of its french fries and now includes apples in all Happy Meals. Still, the report called out the fast-food giant, saying it was one of several chains having no meals that met even the restaurant industry's nutritional criteria.

Orlando-based Darden Restaurants' Olive Garden was in the middle of the pack, though the report noted it offers more-healthy whole-grain pasta. One percent of its meals met CSPI's standards, and 11 percent met those of Kids LiveWell.

Darden's Red Lobster was one of the highest-ranking, with only Subway and IHOP having a greater percentage of meals that got a CSPI thumbs-up. All of Subway's [meals](#) met the CSPI standards. At IHOP it was 31 percent and at Red Lobster, 28 percent.

"Americans are increasingly conscious of making healthy choices ... and Darden wants to ensure that those who dine with us find the choices they desire," Darden said in a statement.

Nutritionists who work closely with the restaurant industry acknowledge changes may seem slow. But it takes time to test products, find sources of healthy foods at an affordable cost and even consider things such as the choking hazards of grapes, said Orlando dietitian Jo Lichten, who

has worked with chains including Wendy's and Starbucks.

"I think we've come a long way," she said. "It is a lot slower than some of the health experts perhaps want."

It's slower than Cindy Waddell would like, too. The Orlando nurse practitioner tries steering her young sons toward healthful choices when they go out to eat but says it's not easy.

"They're mostly the same: burgers, hot dogs," she said. "I think it's tough on the restaurants to please as many kids as possible."

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