

Quick-serve foods slow to change

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During an 18-year study in three quick-serve restaurants, ARS scientists found a decline in trans fats in French fries.

When it comes to eating out and eating healthy portion sizes, knowledge is power.

Agricultural Research Service-funded scientists investigated trends in

portion sizes and the calorie, sodium, [saturated fat](#), and trans fat content of popular meal combos at three U.S. quick-serve chain restaurants. They found little change in portion sizes during a period of 18 years. On a positive note, the study recorded a decline in trans fat content of French fries that followed the first local legislative ban on trans fats in restaurant foods, which was passed by New York City in 2006.

The study was led by nutritional biochemist Alice H. Lichtenstein and colleagues. The team gathered data on 27 common food items served from the three quick-serve chains, commonly called "fast food" restaurants, between 1996 and 2013. They also examined the classic bundled meal of fries, cola, and a burger. Small, medium, and large servings of fries, sweetened cola, a grilled chicken sandwich, and two sizes of cheeseburgers (2 and 4 ounce) were tested.

The researchers reported that overall they did not find changes in product portion sizes—as assessed using total calories—or product reformulation by the restaurants to become consistent with the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Called the "DGAs," these guidelines encourage consumers to reduce intakes of sodium and saturated fat. The DGAs provide science-based advice about how dietary habits can promote health and reduce risk of major chronic diseases.

The team found that based on data from 2013 alone, a large-sized combo meal (large cheeseburger, large fries, and a large sweetened cola) at all three chains contained two-thirds (65 percent) of the estimated daily calorie needs of an individual adult at the low end and more than three-fourths (80 percent) of a day's calorie needs at the high end.

On a somewhat positive note, the researchers reported a trend towards less sodium at the high end in all the individual items assessed between 2000 and 2013. But nevertheless, they found fast [food chains](#) still serve up a whopping amount of sodium. The team's 2013 data show that a

large combo meal of cheeseburger, fries, and cola contained more than 90 percent of the DGA-recommended 2,300-milligrams-per-day limit on sodium.

"The data indicate that fast-food portion sizes stopped increasing during the late 1990s and early 2000s, but that does not mean that all of today's quick-serve [portion sizes](#)—even those labeled 'small'—are in the range we would recommend," says Lichtenstein. "Levels of sodium, calories, and saturated fat, even though variable among the chains we studied, are high for most of the individual menu items we assessed."

U.S. health law now requires large chain restaurants having 20 or more locations to display the calorie content of regular meals offered, and the authors encourage consumers to educate themselves on the nutrition information available and how to use it most effectively.

The scientists published their findings in December 2014 in two papers in *Preventing Chronic Disease*, a journal published by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Provided by Agricultural Research Service

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