

Fast-food value meals are not the healthiest option

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Credit: University of Michigan

Selecting the value meal or combo option at your favorite restaurant may save a few cents, but it isn't the healthiest option compared to choosing items a la carte.

A new study by researchers at the University of Michigan, York College and Virginia Tech University found that consumers make healthier decisions when they choose [food](#) items individually rather than a combination meal with pre-determined items. This former behavior is more prevalent among people who endorse healthy eating as a personal goal.

Value meals have been criticized for leading some people to eat high-calorie food, especially the supersized portions. But the current research indicates that simply offering food in this format isn't ideal, said Stephen Garcia, U-M associate professor of psychology and organizational studies.

"Presenting food items in a combination format or combination meals can contribute to unhealthy food choices," he said.

The research incorporates multiple studies that finds consumers are likely to make "double indulgent" choices—which describes the choice of both an unhealthy entree and a side dish—when offered as a meal rather than the same selections are offered in an a la carte choice format.

In one study, 121 adults were asked what they would choose for lunch. The pictured selections were two healthy entrees (veggie [burger](#) and black bean burger) and two indulgent entrees (bacon cheese burger and a BBQ burger). The side items were salad (healthy) and French fries (indulgent).

In the combo meal condition, participants saw various combinations of the entrees and side items. However, in the a la carte condition, participants first selected the entrée burger and then the side item.

The findings show that 60 percent of the participants picked an indulgent burger and indulgent side item when the options were available

as meals. However, only 33 percent selected an indulgent burger and indulgent side item when the food was selected in the a la carte format.

A second study—which focused on weight-management goals—followed a similar format as the first study, but the 200 participants chose from Belgian waffles (classic or whole grain) and toppings. Even those participants who were most weight-conscious were most affected by the menu presentation—they tended to select the indulgent classic Belgian waffle with the indulgent chocolate spread or strawberries in whipped cream with syrup topping from the meals format rather than from the a la carte format.

There was no difference in the presentation format among individuals who were less concerned about managing their weight, said Yong Kyu Lee, the study's lead author from York College. The study's other author was Kimberlee Weaver at Virginia Tech.

The findings appear in *Psychology & Marketing*.

More information: Yong Kyu Lee et al. I'll Have Fries with That: Increasing Choice Complexity Promotes Indulgent Food Choices, *Psychology & Marketing* (2016). [DOI: 10.1002/mar.20893](https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.20893)

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