**Life in the Fast Food Lane**

**Fast Food**—it’s been a part of American life for many more years than most people realize! If your great-grandparents traveled by train in the early 1900s, they likely ate “fast food,” or quick meals, from the dining car. When the automobile took over, the dining car concept was transformed into fast food restaurants along the roadside.

Today, fast foods are relatively low-cost foods purchased at an outlet featuring quick service and convenience. The term “fast food” refers more accurately to the style of service than to the food itself. Fast food restaurants usually offer a limited menu, although many now include more sandwich choices and other entrees, breakfasts, and salad bars.

The newest fast foods include Mexican and other ethnic choices or fresh foods and preparation methods that go lighter on the calories. Fast food places made up 45 percent of the total number of eating places in 1980.

McDonald’s, Burger King, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Wendy’s, Hardee’s, and Dairy Queen are the top chains in fast food sales.

**Is Fast Food “Junk Food?”**

There really are no junk foods; however, some foods are more nutrient dense than others. That is, they contain more nutrients relative to calories than other foods. Fast foods can supply the variety of nutrients the body needs if you choose wisely. Many restaurants are offering more varied menus and lower-fat options, too. Traditional meals, such as burgers, fries, a
fried turnover, and a soft drink, or fried chicken, biscuit, creamy slaw, and mashed potatoes with gravy, remain high in fat, saturated fat, sodium, and calories, yet low in vitamins A and C and calcium.

How Much Fat Is in Typical Fast Food?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Fat Content (Teaspoons)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cheeseburger or beef taco</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicken nuggets (6)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium French fries</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 slices pepperoni pizza</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fried fish sandwich</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fried chicken sandwich</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quarter pound cheeseburger with sauce</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double cheeseburger with sauce</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large taco salad with fried shell</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 1 teaspoon = 4 grams of fat

These are just examples. Fat content varies based upon such things as the portion size or amount of dressing or cheese included. Many fast food establishments provide nutritional values to consumers on request. Some of the large chains have actually analyzed their menu items, as prepared, for nutrients. Other companies use food composition tables developed by USDA or other sources to estimate the nutritive values of their products. If nutritional values are not available at the counter, ask for the address of the company and write directly for information.

Will the Food I Choose Make a Difference in How Much Fat I Get?

YES!

For example:

If you eat a cheeseburger, French fries, vanilla shake, and apple pie, you will get 10 teaspoons of fat.

If you select a regular hamburger, side salad with low fat dressing, 1% milk, and a frozen yogurt soft-serve cone, you will get 5 teaspoons of fat.

If You Are a Regular at the Fast Food Counter, Keep These Pointers in Mind:

Balance fast food meals with other food choices during the day. As you order, consider the foods you have eaten, or will eat, during the day. A well-balanced diet contains many nutrients. Proteins, vitamins, minerals, fats, and carbohydrates are available in varying amounts in the foods we normally eat. Most foods contain several nutrients; no one food contains them all. That’s why variety is so important in obtaining a nutritious diet. The greater the variety of foods you eat, the more likely you are to have a well-balanced diet—one that provides all the
nutrients you need without any amount leading to an excess or deficit.

**Be aware of the portion size.** The fast food trend is toward “big,” deluxe,” or “super” size. Whether is it a sandwich, an order of fries, a milk shake, or another menu option, bigger portions means more calories, and likely more fat, cholesterol, and sodium. Just a large order of fries and a large soft drink can add a hefty 500 calories to your day’s intake! For most people, the regular size is enough.

**On sandwiches and salads, go easy on the condiments and dressings.** Just one packet of mayonnaise adds about 60 calories and 5 grams of fat. The same size packet of tartar sauce has about 70 calories and 8 grams of fat. A 1 1/2 ounce packet of French dressing contains about 185 calories and 17 grams of fat. Ask if low-fat or fat-free condiments and spreads are available.

**Go easy on the fried foods.** Fried foods are loaded with fat. Choose them only as “sometimes” foods. Some good lower-fat alternatives include grilled chicken sandwich, with little or no mayonnaise; roast beef or turkey sandwich; salad with low-fat dressing; chili; baked potato with broccoli, and little or no butter; and low-fat milk or yogurt.

Food from fast food restaurants can be easy, fun, and healthy. It can be a part of your daily eating plan when you understand and use sound food and nutrition information to make food choices that provide balanced nutrition. Make sure your fast foods fit into an eating plan that is varied, moderate, and balanced for your good health.
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Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences research, extension, and resident education programs are funded in part by Pennsylvania counties, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

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Produced by Information and Communication Technologies in the College of Agricultural Sciences
CAT Uk114 5M503.ps ICT 4564