



### **Fast Food: How Often, How Big a Deal?**

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If the foods we eat most often are the ones that most affect our health, we may be in trouble. Forty-two percent of people in a new report ate fast food at least once in two days. The same report shows that people end up with more calories and less nutrition on days they go to fast-food restaurants than on days they don't. That doesn't mean fast food *can't* be part of healthy eating, but it does suggest that, for many people, it isn't.

This new picture of Americans' reliance on fast food, published in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, means that close to half the population may be eating fast food at least three times a week. The survey on which this report was based shows at least half of those 10 to 39 years old eating fast food that often. Past reports have shown adolescents eating fast food an average of twice a week.

Does this really affect our overall diet? Children, adolescents and adults in the survey who ate at a fast-food restaurant at least once in a two-day period consumed less of most fruit and vegetables, milk and legumes than those who did not. Fast-food eaters ate more fried potatoes and soft drinks, with adults consuming more than twice as much. This explains why calorie, fat, saturated fat and sodium consumption was higher, and intake of vitamins A and C, beta-carotene and fiber tended to be lower.

The same researchers also compared how people who ate fast food at least once in two days then ate on a day when they didn't eat fast food. The result was virtually the same: a day

without fast food ended up lower in fruit, vegetables, milk, and legumes; higher in French fries and soda; higher in calories, fat, saturated fat, and sodium; and lower in protein, fiber, vitamins A and C and beta-carotene.

This doesn't mean a poorer diet quality on fast-food days is inevitable. Perhaps it demonstrates that when we are time-pressured or away from home, we see immediate "survival" as a higher priority than healthy eating. And while "healthier" choices were on the menu at the time this data was gathered, between 1996 and 1998, vegetable and low-fat options have further expanded since then. So if *attitude* was not the barrier to good eating, perhaps today's wider choices have lessened the nutritional differences of days with and without fast food. Clearly, the people in this study did not successfully "make up" for the higher calories or fewer fruit and vegetables in their fast-food meals by the choices they made the rest of the day.

The authors of this report recommend choosing from today's lower-fat choices in order to limit consumption of calories, fat and saturated fat. The jump in soft drink consumption on fast-food restaurant days suggests, for example, that drinking water instead could save quite a few calories. Portion size is also key, whether it's meat, fries, or salad dressing. If you're going to order them, stick with the "small" size, at about 200 calories, rather than a jumbo portion with about 600. The American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR) has issued a statement warning consumers about "value marketing," which leads consumers to believe they save money by ordering larger portions for only slightly more money. Actually, it just makes us more likely to eat more than we need. And that's no savings at all.

If you need help to improve your eating habits and prevent weight gain, *Shape Your Future...Your Weigh!*<sup>TM</sup> can help. Contact your local base Health and Wellness Center (HAWC) or Dietitian for more information.