

[IMAGE]

## **Slowing Down Fast Food**

By Dr. Claudia Anrig

It's 6 o'clock and you just picked up the kids from soccer practice, or perhaps you just got off work and picked them up from day care. Regardless, you're running late and you know there's nothing prepared for dinner. The kids are asking for fast food again and perhaps you're thinking, "What's the harm?"

### **What's the Harm?**

The American Psychological Association has recognized that there is more to our obesity problem than just genes or lack of exercise. In a recent article, Dr. Kelly Brownell said that the problem isn't so much a lack of self-control as it is a "toxic food environment." Every street corner has an option for fast food and none of them is healthy. Obviously we know this, but the convenience outweighs a critical concern for our daily dietary needs being met.

Of course, Brownell acknowledges that genes and self-control play a role in obesity, diabetes and the myriad of other health problems that result from unhealthy eating habits. But in his view, both face a losing battle against the overabundance and availability of bad or unhealthy food choices.

A fast food worker hands two bags of food to a customer at a drive-thru window. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark Brownell is particularly concerned about the advertising allowed for fast-food restaurants. Joe Camel has been taken off billboards because of his obvious negative influence on our children, but the fast-food industry has targeted their commercials toward children and their ability to influence the buying habits of their parents.

### **Trans Fats**

"If fast food is bad, then trans fat is evil," writes Guto Harri in a recent article from the BBC News. Trans fats increase the damaging cholesterol content of a meal, clog arteries and increase the risk of heart attack. Partially hydrogenated vegetable oils or trans fats:

- turn oily foods into semi-solid foods (Oreo cookie filling, etc.);
- extend the shelf life of products;
- are put in pastries, margarine and fast foods; and
- have no nutritional benefit.

A fast food cheeseburger. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark Obviously, the growing concern about premature death and rising obesity rates has made trans fats a major target. It has been determined that even a small reduction in the daily consumption of trans fats can significantly cut the risk of heart disease and can help lower the levels of "bad" cholesterol.

This concern has been made known to all major fast-food chains and yet only a few have done something about it. Wendy's quit using cooking oil containing trans fats in the summer of 2006 and in April 2007, all Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurants ceased use of trans fats. McDonald's promised to reduce trans fats in its products more than four years ago and "aims to roll out a new cooking oil" this year. Still, trans fats aren't the end of the fast-food story.

### **Cancer Risk**

The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM) recently filed suit against seven major restaurants and fast-food chains in the state of California. They include: McDonald's, Burger King, Chick-fil-A, Chili's, Applebee's, Outback Steakhouse and TGI Friday's. The reason for the suit is these companies are knowingly serving food containing carcinogens without a health warning to the consumer.

The PCRM commissioned an independent laboratory to test grilled chicken products from California outlets of all seven chains. PhIP (one of a group of carcinogenic compounds called heterocyclic amines) was found in every grilled chicken sample provided for testing. Heterocyclic amines were added to the list of known carcinogens in 2005 and PhIP, specifically, has been on the California governor's list of chemicals known to cause cancer for more than a decade.

"Grilled chicken can cause cancer, and consumers deserve to know that this supposedly healthy product is actually just as bad for them as high-fat fried chicken," says PCRM President Neal Barnard, MD. "Even a grilled chicken salad increases the risk of breast cancer, prostate cancer and other forms of this lethal disease."

What was once considered the healthy option on the average fast-food menu may have become the least healthy.

### **Healthier Solutions**

A mother and young daughter enjoy a salad together. - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark It's time to consider that the only way fast-food restaurants will start sharing our growing concern for healthier eating choices is if we stop buying their products. It's time to seriously consider the risk to ourselves and our children and weigh those risks against the "convenience" being offered by fast food.

As consumers we have other options. Consider the following ideas for healthier eating:

- Prepare a menu each week and stick to it.
- Sunday should be prep day: chop vegetables and prepare casseroles, then freeze them for future use.
- Consider purchasing prepared meats (boneless skinless chicken breast, etc.) that can be defrosted and quickly prepared.
- Slow cookers are gaining popularity again and healthy recipes aren't hard to find. Prep the food in the morning and when you get home from work, dinner is ready to serve.
- Many grocery stores are catering to our busy lifestyle but if you still want healthier choices, consider purchasing rotisserie chickens, homemade soups by the pint and bags of prepared tossed green salad.
- Another great idea is to barter with a friend or encourage a grandparent who loves to cook to prepare meals in advance for your family. Some of the most time-consuming steps in cooking can be done in advance (chopping vegetables, etc.).

If you are a parent of infants and toddlers, you have the option to never start the fastfood track. By deciding not to go in this direction, you will find different resources that will help you to prepare healthy snacks and meals. For information on healthier meal planning and recipes, visit: [www.wholefoodsmarket.com](http://www.wholefoodsmarket.com) recipes and [www.cookinglight.com](http://www.cookinglight.com).

If your children are already addicted to the fast-food lifestyle, it's best to take a few months to slowly wean your family from this habit. Rather than your children thinking this change is punishment, consider approaching this new lifestyle with vigor. Why not celebrate healthy food by embracing new recipes, asking someone you know to teach your entire family how to prepare a meal, and looking for classes, Web sites and books that will expand your menu choices? If the adage, "You are what you eat," is true, as a parent you

have a responsibility to give your children a healthy start.

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