



Fast Food Nation

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Life is more hectic than ever -- between school, sports, clubs and friends, who has time to think about what to eat? Time for plan B: fast food.

"Fast food is easy," said Sarah Hudson, a 14-year-old from Portland, Maine, enjoying a snack at McDonald's. "It's quick and it tastes good." She figures she eats fast food about twice a week.

"As long as it tastes good and it fills you up then that's all I care about," said her friend Ryan Bell, 13. "We buy it because it tastes good. If they made healthy food I doubt we would buy it."

The average American now consumes about three hamburgers and four orders of french fries every week. That's 90 grams of fat and 2,520 calories. The average person needs about 2,000 calories for a whole day.

Most Americans know that fast food isn't exactly good for them, but can't quite seem to break the habit. In fact, consumption of high-fat fast food is increasing, in part because fast food restaurants are an inescapable part of American life.



Fast Food Nation

According to *Fast Food Nation*, a new book by Eric Schlosser, 96 percent of American schoolchildren can identify Ronald McDonald. The only fictional character with a higher degree of recognition is Santa Claus.

Schlosser says it's nearly impossible to overstate the impact of the fast food industry on the nation's culture, economy and diet. "McDonald's Golden Arches," he writes, "are now more widely recognized than the Christian cross."



The Obesity Epidemic

Considering America's love of the french fry, it's no surprise that kids are getting bigger. The percentage of children and teenagers who are overweight has tripled in the past 30 years, according to the Center for Disease Control. One-third of overweight students are so heavy they will probably have serious health problems later in life.

Of course it's not just young people who are getting heavier -- it's all Americans. U.S. Surgeon General Dr. David Satcher is so concerned about childhood obesity that he has declared it an "epidemic."

"We see a nation of young people seriously at risk of starting out obese and dooming themselves to the difficult task of overcoming a tough illness," he said.

He's not talking about kids who are chubby or a little plump. These are kids who are more than 20 percent above their ideal weight -- kids whose weight makes it hard for them to move around, get up stairs and even breathe.

Doctors are finding that more and more severely overweight children have medical problems such as a fatty liver, a precursor to liver disease, high blood pressure, and an increasing likelihood of Type 2 diabetes. In addition, obese children are becoming prime candidates for heart attacks and strokes even while in their teens.

Researchers say it's important to realize that obesity is a health problem -- not a judgment about how people's bodies should look. Everyone has their own idea about how they like to look, but nobody wants to have a heart attack.

How can you tell if you are overweight, obese, or just about right? Doctors usually calculate your body mass index (BMI) a number based on height and weight.

Ideal weight is usually given in a range of at least 15 pounds. If you have a small frame, you should probably be toward the bottom of the range. And, logically, the opposite for bigger people.

If you are more than a few pounds above your ideal weight, you are overweight. But if you are more than 20 percent above your ideal weight, you are obese. That means your weight could start to endanger your health.

The Corporate Effect

Weight is strongly influenced by genes -- you are more likely to be heavy if your parents are heavy. But, there is something you can do. Doctors say the most important way for kids and adults to lose weight is to change their eating habits. That means finding an alternative

to all-night pizza delivery, convenience stores, and fast food restaurants.

Sometimes it's even hard to find nutritious food in school, where many cafeterias have been replaced with mall-style food courts. Many schools across the country have also signed contracts with soft drink companies like Coke and Pepsi. The schools agree to install soda machines and usually guarantee a set number of sales.

In return, the soda companies give the schools some of the money that collects in the machines. Schools often use the money from these contracts for teacher salaries and special programs but such contracts often require schools to sell as many as 50 sodas per student per school year.

Recent studies by the U.S. Agriculture Department now link obesity to soft drink consumption for the first time. The studies show that students drink soda instead of eating healthy meals, and then eat more food later because they are not filled up. So students are drinking more sugar and syrup and eating more food than they would if they just ate a regular lunch.

The critics' voices have been heard. In the past few weeks Coca-Cola announced they will add water and juice to their school soda machines and will discourage exclusive contracts. Pepsi executives said they plan similar changes.

Senator Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.) has introduced legislation that will allow the federal government to more tightly restrict school soft drink sales. "Taxpayers are paying hundreds of millions of dollars for a federal school lunch program, but many kids are filling up on empty calories," said Senator Leahy. "That's what has to change."

Physical Education

And if that wasn't enough, there's one more thing nudging kids toward the top of the scale: the extinction of gym class. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently reported that from 1991-1997 daily participation in physical education dropped from 42 percent to 29 percent, and that almost half of all teens ages 12-21 get no vigorous exercise on a regular basis.

Schools across the country are trying to make gym class more fun by adding activities like rollerblading, rock climbing or treadmill running. Only Illinois requires daily gym class for grades K-12 but many health groups are pushing for more required P.E.

As doctors, teacher, parents and kids try to work on developing healthy eating and exercise habits, there's also the danger that some kids will go too far. Many kids of normal weight seem to think they're fat -- and can develop eating disorders that are just as dangerous to their health as diabetes and stroke.