



Live Well Restaurant Initiative

How Restaurants Impact Health

Facts about Restaurants and U.S. Eating Patterns

Children and families eat out more than ever.

- Meals prepared outside of the home have become a major source of food for kids and adults, accounting for 35 percent of total daily calories for kids.¹
- In 2010, households spent almost half of their food budgets on foods prepared outside of the home.²
- On a typical day, nearly a third of children consume fast food.³ Children who regularly eat fast food consume more calories, fat, and added sugar and less fiber, milk, fruits, and non-starchy vegetables than children who do not eat fast food on a regular basis.⁴

Restaurant food tends to be less healthy than food prepared at home.

- Restaurant food contains more calories per meal, more total fat and saturated fat per calorie, and less fiber, calcium, and iron than food prepared at home.⁵
- Many restaurant items contain more fat than is recommended for an entire day, and many menu items that seem healthy or are promoted as “healthy” can have a significant amount of hidden fat.⁶

Healthy options are difficult to find in most restaurants.

- A study of the top 25 chain restaurants in the United States found that 93 percent of all possible children’s meal combinations are too high in calories, 45 percent are too high in saturated fat, and 86 percent are too high in sodium.¹⁵
- In telephone interviews, menu developers and marketing executives at chain restaurants said they believe there is low demand for healthier foods. They also reported obstacles to offering healthy foods, including the short shelf life of produce, the greater amount of preparation time required, low sales, and high labor costs.¹⁷

Many restaurants encourage unhealthy eating behaviors.

- Children eat almost twice as many calories when they eat a meal at a restaurant (765 calories) compared with an average meal at home (425 calories). Children and adolescents also eat more fat and saturated fat when eating at a restaurant than they do when dining at home.¹⁸
- Fast food restaurants tend to offer discounts for ordering larger quantities of food. Most restaurants do not provide nutritional information on the menus, and restaurant signage is three to four times more likely to encourage unhealthy eating than healthy eating.
- Unhealthy options are almost always the same price or less expensive than healthier choices.¹⁹

Unhealthy restaurants are often located in lower income neighborhoods and communities of color.

- Lower-income areas have roughly a third more fast food restaurants than higher-income areas.
- African-American neighborhoods have higher proportions of fast food outlets than predominantly white neighborhoods.²⁰

People have trouble estimating the number of calories in restaurant meals.

- In general, people are unable to accurately estimate the amounts of fat, saturated fat, sodium, and calories in foods.²¹
- One study found that nine out of ten people underestimate the number of calories in unhealthy menu items by an average of 600 calories.²²
- Even trained dietitians underestimate calorie counts by 200 to 600 calories.²³

Restaurant customers use nutritional information to make healthier choices.

- Providing nutritional information leads many customers to select lower-calorie meals.^{24, 25}
- In one study, parents selected meals for themselves and their children from a McDonald's menu. Parents who saw nutritional information about menu items ordered 100 fewer calories for their children, on average, than parents who did not see nutritional information.²⁶
- Not everyone makes use of nutritional information. People who consider dining out as a necessity are more likely to use nutritional information at a restaurant than people who see dining out as an indulgence.²⁷



Endnotes

¹ Guthrie et al., supra note 1; Mancino L, Todd JE, Guthrie J, and Lin B. How Food Away From Home Affects Children's Diet Quality. ERR-104. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service: October 2010. Accessed April 1, 2011. Available at: www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/ERR104/ERR104.pdf.

² National Restaurant Association. Restaurant Industry Pocket Factbook. Accessed December 2010. Available at: www.restaurant.org/store/C1660.html.

³ Bowman et al., supra note 2.

⁴ Id.

⁵ Guthrie et al., supra note 1.

⁶ Jones A, Bohm E, and Hill E. Healthy Dining in San Diego, 5th ed. San Diego: Healthy Dining Publications, Hill and Hill, 2000.

¹⁴ Saelens B, Glanz K, Sallis J, and Frank L. "Nutrition Environment Measures Study in Restaurants (NEMS-R)." American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 32(4): 273–281, 2007. "Healthy" meals were defined as having no more than 800 calories, 30 percent of calories from fat, and 10 percent of calories from saturated fat, and were identified as healthy by the restaurant.

- ¹⁵ Center for Science in the Public Interest. Kids' Meals: Obesity on the Menu. August 2008. Accessed April 1, 2011. Available at: <http://cspinet.org/new/pdf/kidsmeals-eport.pdf>.
- ¹⁶ Lewis L, Sloane D, and Nascimento L, et al. "African Americans' Access to Healthy Food Options in South Los Angeles Restaurants." *American Journal of Public Health*, 95: 668–673, 2005.
- ¹⁷ Glanz K, Resnicow K, Seymour J, Hoy K, Stewart H, Lyons M, and Goldberg J. "How Major Restaurant Chains Plan Their Menus: The Role of Profit, Demand, and Health." *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 32(5): 383–388, May 2007.
- ¹⁸ Zoumas-Morse C et al. "Children's Patterns of Macronutrient Intake and Associations with Restaurant and Home Eating." *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 101: 923–925, 2001.
- ¹⁹ Saelens et al., supra note 14.
- ²⁰ Morland K, Wing S, Diez Roux A, and Poole C. "Neighborhood Characteristics Associated with the Location of Food Stores and Food Service Places." *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 22: 23–29, 2002.
- ²¹ Burton S, Howlett E, and Tangari A. "Food for Thought: How Will the Nutrition Labeling of Quick Service Restaurant Menu Items Influence Customers' Product Evaluations, Purchase Intentions, and Choices?" *Journal of Retailing*, 85(3): 258–273, 2009; Burton S, Creyer E, Kees J, and Huggins K. "Attacking the Obesity Epidemic: The Potential Health Benefits of Providing Nutrition Information in Restaurants." *American Journal of Public Health*, 96(9): 1669–1675, 2006.
- ²² Burton S, Creyer E, Kees J, and Huggins K. "Attacking the Obesity Epidemic: The Potential Health Benefits of Providing Nutrition Information in Restaurants." *American Journal of Public Health*, 96(9):1669–1675, 2006.
- ²³ Backstrand J et al. *Fat Chance*. Washington, DC: Center for Science in the Public Interest, 1997.
- ²⁴ Burton et al., supra note 21.
- ²⁵ Dumanovsky T, Huang CY, Bassett MT, and Silver LD. "Consumer Awareness of Fast-Food Calorie Information in New York City After Implementation of a Menu Labeling Regulation." *American Journal of Public Health*, 100(12):2520–2525, 2010.
- ²⁶ Tandon PS, Wright J, Zhou C, Rogers CB, and Christakis DA. "Nutrition Menu Labeling May Lead to Lower-Calorie Restaurant Meal Choices for Children." *Pediatrics*. Available at: <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2010/01/25/peds.2009-1117.full.pdf+html>.
- ²⁷ Josiam and Foster. "Nutritional Information on Restaurant Menus: Who Cares and Why Restaurateurs Should Bother." *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 21(7): 2009.