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Obesity on the Kids' Menus at Top Chains

New Study Shows that 93 percent of Kids' Meals at Restaurants Provide Children with Calorie Overdose

SACRAMENTO, CA, AUGUST 4, 2008....Every single possible combination of the children's meals at KFC, Taco Bell, Sonic, Jack in the Box and Chick-fil-A is too high in calories, according to a study released today by the nonprofit Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) and the California Center for Public Health Advocacy (CCPHA). Analysis of the nutritional quality of kids' meals at 13 top restaurant chains shows that 93 percent of 1,474 possible choices exceed 430 calories—an amount that is one-third of what the Institute of Medicine recommends children aged 4 through 8 should consume in a day.

KFC, for example, has a wide variety of side items but no healthy choices for keeping a reasonable limit on children's caloric intake, according to the study. One such high-cal combo, KFC kid's meal of popcorn chicken, baked beans, biscuit, fruit punch and Teddy Grahams has 940 calories.

Most of the kids' meals at McDonald's and Wendy's (93 percent at both) are too high in calories, as are the options at Burger King (92 percent), Dairy Queen (89 percent) and Arby's (69 percent).

Subway's kids' meals came out on top. Only a third of its Fresh Fit for Kids meals, which include a mini-sub, juice box and one of several healthful side items (apple slices, raisins or yogurt), exceed the 430-calorie threshold. Subway is the only chain that doesn't offer soft drinks with kids' meals.

"Parents want to feed their children healthy meals but America's chain restaurants are setting parents up to fail," said CSPI nutrition policy director Margo G. Wootan. "McDonald's, Burger King, KFC and other chains are conditioning kids to expect burgers, fried chicken, pizza, French fries, macaroni and cheese, and soda in various combinations at almost every lunch and dinner."

Besides being almost always too high in calories, 45 percent of the kids' meals at the 13 chains studied are too high in saturated and trans fat, and 86 percent are too high in sodium. That's alarming, according to the study's authors, because a quarter of children between the ages

of five and 10 show early signs of heart disease, such as high LDL (the “bad” cholesterol) or elevated blood pressure.

“People may not get a heart attack until their 50s or 60s, but arteries begin to clog in childhood,” said CCPHA’s Executive Director Dr. Harold Goldstein. “Most of these kids’ meals put America’s children on the fast track to obesity, diabetes, heart attacks and premature death.”

Though the overwhelming majority of restaurant kids’ meals are nutritionally poor, calorie counts on menus and menu boards would help parents assemble healthier meals for their children. If Arby’s menus had calorie counts, parents could see that substituting a fruit cup and a juice box for fries and a soda would cut a popcorn chicken meal from 780 calories to 422.

The California legislature is considering a landmark bill, SB 1420, that would support consumer’s efforts to make healthier decisions by requiring chain restaurants to post calorie counts on their menu boards. New York City has already implemented a menu labeling law, and similar legislation has been passed in San Francisco and Portland.

“How’s a parent supposed to know if the kids’ meal they’re buying offers a calorie overdose?” asks Senator Alex Padilla (D-San Fernando Valley). “My bill, SB 1420, puts the calorie counts right where every parent would expect to find them—on the menu board.”

The study, *Kids’ Meals: Obesity on the Menu*, only scrutinized the chains that have dedicated children’s menus *and* that provide nutrition information on their Web sites or elsewhere. Applebee’s, T.G.I. Friday’s, Outback Steakhouse, Olive Garden, Red Lobster and IHOP do not disclose nutrition information for most menu items even upon request. The full study is available on-line at www.cspinet.org/kidsmeals.

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The California Center for Public Health Advocacy is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization leading efforts in California to understand and address the state’s growing obesity crisis.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) is a nonprofit health-advocacy group based in Washington, D.C., that focuses on nutrition, food safety and pro-health alcohol policies. CSPI is supported largely by the 900,000 U.S. and Canadian subscribers to its *Nutrition Action Healthletter* and by foundation grants.