

# Fast Food Primer: A tool for community advocates

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© June 2008

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Strategic  
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Promoting healthy  
food and activity environments

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## A tool for community advocates

### INTRODUCTION

Since the first fast food restaurants\* opened in the 1940s and 1950s, their numbers have increased exponentially and major fast food chains now have restaurants all over the world. Fast food has become an integral part of the American diet in particular, relied on by many for multiple meals per week. Because of the central role that fast food plays in our lives, questions have emerged about the potentially negative impact on children's health and community well-being. Books and movies like *Fast Food Nation* and *Super Size Me* have helped draw attention to these issues and have spurred interest in how the impact of fast food can be lessened. This brief provides answers to questions about fast food and offers recommendations for how community members and advocacy organizations can work to reduce the impacts of major fast food restaurant chains.

### FAST FOOD Q&A

**Q:** How many fast food restaurants are there?

**A:** The United States now has more fast food restaurants than public libraries or hospitals.<sup>1</sup> In 1970 there were roughly 70,000 fast food restaurants in the United States and today the number has more than doubled to over 186,000 fast food restaurants.<sup>2</sup> The table below shows the number of fast food restaurants worldwide and in the United States for just the top three fast food corporations.

TABLE 1. Number\* of Fast Food Outlets

	WORLDWIDE	UNITED STATES
<b>Yum! Brands, Inc</b> (owners of Taco Bell, KFC, Pizza Hut, Long John Silvers, and A&W) <sup>3</sup>	34,277	20,472
<b>McDonald's</b> <sup>4</sup>	31,886	14,000*
<b>Burger King</b> <sup>5</sup>	11,129	7,300*

\* Numbers are approximate

\*For purposes of this brief, "fast food" restaurants are defined as quick service restaurants with minimum table service.

This brief was prepared by Samuels & Associates for the Strategic Alliance.

**Strategic Alliance** is a state coalition advocating for healthy food and activity environments and is staffed by Prevention Institute.

More information can be found at [www.preventioninstitute.org/sa](http://www.preventioninstitute.org/sa).

**Fast food restaurants and products are also now found in schools, hospitals and other non-traditional places.**

- Roughly 20% of public schools in the United States serve brand name fast foods on campus, like McDonald's, Taco Bell, and Pizza Hut.<sup>6</sup>
- Out of 116 university-affiliated children's hospitals surveyed in the United States and Canada, 85% sell unhealthy foods and beverages in fast food franchise outlets or other food outlets.<sup>7</sup>

**In addition, studies have shown that fast food restaurants tend to be more prevalent in predominately low-income, African American and Latino communities,<sup>8-10</sup> like the California cities listed in the table below.**

**TABLE 2.**  
**Number of Fast Food Restaurants in a Few Low-Income California Cities**

	McDonald's	Burger King	KFC	Taco Bell	TOTAL
<b>South LA</b> (with in 5 miles of zip code 90007)	50	25	23	21	119
<b>Baldwin Park</b> (with in 5 miles of zip code 91706)	19	10	7	10	46
<b>Oakland</b> (with in 5 miles of zip code 94601)	13	10	9	6	38
<b>Santa Ana</b> (with in 5 miles of zip code 92701)	25	4	9	20	58
<b>Chula Vista</b> (with in 5 miles of zip code 91911)	19	6	10	8	43

**Q: Who eats fast food?**

**A:** A lot of people! In 2004, Americans spent \$124 billion at fast food restaurants—up from \$6.2 billion in 1970.<sup>2</sup> On average, one in four Americans<sup>11</sup> and nearly one in every three children in the United States eat fast food every day.<sup>12</sup> However, not everybody eats the same amount of fast food. Fast food consumption varies by age, gender, income, and race/ethnicity.<sup>13</sup> Variation in consumption may be the result of targeted marketing,<sup>14,15</sup> restaurant location and density,<sup>8,16</sup> and education levels.<sup>13</sup>

- In a survey of California children (ages 9-11), 78% reported eating fast foods one or more times in the previous week.<sup>17</sup>

- Adults ages 20 to 29 are 4 times more likely to eat fast food than adults over the age of 55 years.<sup>11</sup>
- Men have reported consuming more fast food than women.<sup>13</sup>

## Q: Can fast food be part of a healthy diet?

**A:** Given the portion sizes and the nutrient content of many fast food options it is very difficult for fast food to be part of a healthy diet.

- Foods eaten away from home are often higher in fat and energy than foods prepared at home,<sup>18</sup> and eating out—especially at fast food restaurants—is associated with higher levels of overweight and obesity.<sup>8, 13, 19-23</sup>
- Fast food consumption may also contribute to a low intake of vegetables, fruits, dietary fiber, and some vitamins.<sup>13</sup>
- Portion sizes at fast food restaurants have increased significantly in the last few decades<sup>24</sup> and may contain one half to a whole day’s worth of calories, fat, and sodium.<sup>25</sup> As shown in the table below, a typical fast food meal nearly exceeds the intake of calories, fats, cholesterol, and sodium recommended by the US government for an entire day.
- To burn off the calories from a meal of a McDonald’s Big Mac, large fries, ketchup, and large soda, a person weighing 140 pounds would have to walk for over four and a half hours.<sup>26, 27</sup>
- Fast food consumption contributes an additional 57 calories per day to a child’s diet, which can add up to roughly 6 pounds of weight gain per child per year.<sup>12</sup>

*To burn off the calories from a meal of a McDonald’s Big Mac, large fries, ketchup, and large soda, a person weighing 140 pounds would have to walk for over four and a half hours.*

**TABLE 3. Fast Food Meal vs. Government Recommendations**

	<b>FAST FOOD MEAL</b> (Big Mac, large fries, ketchup, large soda)	<b>RECOMMENDED INTAKE</b> (Daily Values)	<b>PERCENT OF DAILY VALUES</b>
<b>Calories</b>	1470	2000	74%
<b>Total Fat</b>	61	<65g	94%
<b>Saturated Fat</b>	16	<20g	82%
<b>Trans Fat</b>	9.5	-	-
<b>Cholesterol</b>	80	<300	26%
<b>Sodium</b>	1560	<2,400	65%

## **Q:** Aren't fast food restaurants offering healthier alternatives?

**A:** Though fast food restaurants may offer some healthier options, these options are limited, selected less often, and may actually not be as healthy as they seem.

- Fewer than 1 out of every 100 customers order salads offered at McDonald's.<sup>1</sup>
- A McDonald's California Cobb Salad with crispy chicken, ranch dressing, and croutons has more calories than a BigMac.<sup>27</sup>
- For consumers who are interested in the nutrient content of their food, nutrition information can be difficult to find at restaurants and may only be available through websites.<sup>28</sup> Though some fast food restaurants have offered to place nutrition labels on food product packaging, this information would only be available to consumers after purchase.
- Although specific data for fast food is not available, the food industry in general spends much more money advertising unhealthy foods than advertising healthy foods. The industry spends over \$30 billion on advertising for its products, but only 2% of that budget is spent on fruits, vegetables, beans, and whole grains.<sup>29</sup>
- As shown in the table below, 93% of foods on the McDonald's menu do not meet the American Heart Association recommendation that a healthy diet not exceed 30% of calories from fat and 7% of calories from saturated fat.<sup>30</sup>
- It may be possible to make a special order at fast food restaurants (such as holding cheese, dressings, sauces, and toppings) to meet the American Heart Association's recommendation, but this may make the food less appealing since fast food was not designed to be eaten without these components.

*A McDonald's California Cobb Salad with crispy chicken, ranch dressing, and croutons has more calories than a BigMac.*

## **Q:** Why do my kids always beg for fast food?

**A:** Fast food chains work hard to attract their young customers by using innovative marketing and advertising techniques such as movie and television character tie-ins with fast food products, toy give-aways, close proximity of fast food restaurants to schools, and developing products that match the taste preferences of kids.

- Fast food companies spend a significant amount of money advertising and promoting their products and their messages are reaching children—20% of all meals sold at McDonald's are Happy Meals.<sup>31</sup>
- Fast food chains spend about \$3 billion annually on television advertising.<sup>32</sup> In 2000, McDonald's alone spent \$665 million on TV, radio, print, and outdoors signs<sup>1</sup> and 40% of their advertising directly targets children.<sup>33</sup>

**TABLE 4. McDonald's Menu**

Menu Items with >30% calories from fat or >7% of calories from saturated fat.*	Menu Items with <30% calories from fat and <7% of calories from saturated fat.*
<p>Hamburger            Cheeseburger            Double Cheeseburger            Quarter Pounder            Quarter Pounder with Cheese            Double Quarter Pounder with Cheese            Big Mac            Big N' Tasty            Big N' Tasty with Cheese            Filet-O-Fish            McChicken            Premium Crispy Chicken Classic Sandwich            Premium Crispy Chicken Club Sandwich            Premium Grilled Chicken Ranch BLT Sandwich            Premium Crispy Chicken Ranch BLT Sandwich            Premium Spicy Chicken Sandwich            Small French Fries            Medium French Fries            Large French Fries            Chicken McNuggets (4 piece)            Chicken McNuggets (6 piece)            Chicken McNuggets (10 piece)            Chicken McNuggets (20 piece)            Chicken Selects Premium Breast Strips (5 pc)            Chicken Selects® Premium Breast Strips (10 pc)            Snack Wrap with Ranch            Asian Salad with Grilled Chicken (without dressing)            Asian Salad with Crispy Chicken (without dressing)            Asian Salad (without chicken and dressing)            Bacon Ranch Salad with Grilled Chicken (without dressing)            Bacon Ranch Salad with Crispy Chicken (without dressing)            Bacon Ranch Salad (without chicken and dressing)            Caesar Salad with Grilled Chicken (without dressing)            Caesar Salad with Crispy Chicken (without dressing)            Caesar Salad (without chicken and dressing)            Fruit &amp; Walnut Salad            Egg McMuffin            Sausage McMuffin            Sausage McMuffin with Egg            Bacon, Egg &amp; Cheese Biscuit            Sausage Biscuit with Egg            Sausage Biscuit            Biscuit            Bacon, Egg &amp; Cheese McGriddles            Sausage, Egg &amp; Cheese McGriddles            Sausage McGriddles            Big Breakfast            Deluxe Breakfast            Sausage Burrito            Hotcakes and Sausage            Sausage Patty            Scrambled Eggs (2)            Hash Browns            Warm Cinnamon Roll            Deluxe Warm Cinnamon Roll</p>	<p>Premium Grilled Chicken Classic Sandwich            Side Salad (without dressing)            English Muffin            Hotcakes (margarine 2 pats &amp; syrup)</p>
<b>TOTAL: 56 ITEMS (93%)</b>	<b>TOTAL: 4 ITEMS (7%)</b>

\*Does not include desserts, beverages, sauces, or dressings

- Many of the ads are aimed at getting children to nag or pester their parents to buy fast food.<sup>15,34</sup>
- Studies have shown that young children have little understanding of the persuasive intent of advertising.<sup>35-38</sup>
- Fast food restaurants work closely with toy makers and the movie and television industry to promote their products. McDonald's sells or gives away more than 1.5 billion toys every year.<sup>39</sup>
- A study of fast food outlets and their proximity to schools indicated that 78% of schools in the Chicago area had at least one fast food restaurant located within 800 meters and that overall fast food restaurants were significantly clustered within walking distance of schools.<sup>16</sup>
- Children are also drawn to fast food restaurants for their playgrounds. There are about 8,000 playgrounds operated by McDonald's and roughly 3,200 operated by Burger King.<sup>32</sup>

**Q: Even though fast food restaurants sell unhealthy foods, don't they provide good jobs for community members?**

**A: While fast food establishments employ a wide range of people, questions have been raised about adequacy of wages, benefits, and working conditions.**

- The top three fast food companies (McDonald's, Burger King and Yum! Brands) employ approximately 2.7 million people worldwide.<sup>32</sup>
- While top executives of fast food corporations make millions of dollars each year,<sup>40</sup> the majority of workers are part-time restaurant crew members making as little as \$5.15 per hour.<sup>41</sup> In 2003, the top executive at McDonald's earned almost \$6 million dollars.<sup>40</sup>
- Many fast-food jobs are held by young or part-time workers who do not receive benefits.<sup>42</sup>
- The annual rate at which fast food workers quit or are fired (turnover rate) has been estimated to be anywhere between 80 to 400%. The average annual turnover rate for all jobs in the United States is about 20%.<sup>43</sup> This means that during the course of one year a fast food restaurant may have to rehire an entirely new crew up to four times.

**Q: Fast food corporations have programs that benefit our communities, right?**

**A: While fast food restaurants have made some efforts to reduce their impact on the environment, promote health, and improve working conditions for employees, these efforts have not gone far**

*Fast food restaurants work closely with toy makers and the movie and television industry to promote their products.*

enough and may often simply be attempts at improving public image and increasing profits.

- A quote drawn directly from McDonald's corporate responsibility report states, "corporate responsibility will help us not only to build trust in McDonald's and strengthen the reputation of our global brand, but also to be a more profitable business."<sup>44</sup>
- Instead of funding schools directly through donations, fast food corporations provide instructional materials and incentive programs that promote their products to students and are aimed at building brand loyalty.<sup>45</sup>
- While promoting exercise to maintain a healthy lifestyle, fast food restaurants continue to spend millions each year promoting high calorie foods through advertisements, toy give-aways, and movie and television show product placement and character tie-ins.<sup>32</sup>

## REDUCING THE NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF FAST FOOD

**Q:** Given fast food restaurants' negative impact on children's health and community well-being, what can the fast food industry do to improve?

**A:** Strategic Alliance convened a group of experts to develop a "wish list" of what the fast food industry could do to improve children's food environments. The list included the following:

- Provide healthy food and beverages as the standard in all children's meals and on children's menus.
- Add new menu items that are healthy, affordable, tasty, and satisfying—including entrées, appetizers and side dishes.
- Reformulate food products to decrease calories, saturated fat, trans fat, sodium, and added sugars, and increase fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds.
- Make available and promote low-calorie or no-calorie beverage options without artificial sweetener (e.g., water, low-fat milk) that help customers to manage their calorie intake.
- Eliminate large and extra-large food and beverage portions.
- List the calorie, saturated fat, trans fat, and sodium content of food and beverage items on menus and post calories on menu boards.
- Eliminate all marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children and youth.
- Stop offering toys and using cartoon and other popular icons to promote foods to children.
- Discontinue marketing tactics that promote over-consumption and the mentality that larger portions are more favorable.

*While promoting exercise to maintain a healthy lifestyle, fast food restaurants continue to spend millions each year promoting high calorie foods through advertisements, toy give-aways, and movie and television show product placement and character tie-ins.*

- Shift all marketing away from high-calorie, less-healthy options to healthy options, and market healthy foods more than less healthy options.<sup>46</sup>

## **Q:** What can communities and local governments do to reduce the negative impacts of fast food restaurants?

### **A:** Communities can support zoning laws, menu labeling laws, and removal of fast food restaurants from health care facilities and schools. For example:

- Zoning laws give communities the opportunity to exert a wide variety of restrictions on fast food restaurants at the local level. For example, conditional use permits can be used to encourage restaurants to improve the nutritional quality of their food and create buffer zones between fast food restaurants and schools.<sup>47</sup>
- Several cities in California have either banned or limited the number of fast food restaurants through zoning laws. For example: Carlsbad has enacted a ban on drive-through service restaurants, Calistoga has banned fast food restaurants to preserve the historic character of their town, and Westwood Village in Los Angeles limits the number of fast food outlets by regulating how close restaurants can be to one another.<sup>48</sup>
- Menu labeling laws or regulations, which would require fast food restaurants to post nutrient information on menu boards, can provide consumers with information necessary to make informed choices.<sup>49</sup> New York City passed a law requiring calorie labeling on restaurant menus in some restaurants—mostly in fast food restaurants.<sup>50, 51</sup>
- Guidelines can be created for responsible fast food marketing to children, which limit or eliminate food marketing aimed at children too young to understand the intent of advertising.
- To ensure the health of vulnerable populations, fast food restaurants and products can be removed from health care facilities and schools.

## **CONCLUSION**

Reducing the negative impact that fast food restaurants have on communities must include efforts from community members, government, local fast food restaurants, and fast food corporations. Community members and organizations can work with government to create policies and programs that inform consumers of the nutrient content of foods at the point of purchase, limit fast food advertising to children, and create buffer zones between schools and fast food restaurants. Fast food corporations can also play a role in providing healthy options, promoting healthy menu options, disclosing nutrient information on menu boards, and limiting targeted advertising to children and minorities.

## **RESOURCES**

- *Setting the Bar: Recommendations for Food and Beverage Industry Action:* [www.preventioninstitute.org/sa/publications.html](http://www.preventioninstitute.org/sa/publications.html)
- *Berkeley Media Studies Toolkit:* [www.bmsg.org/proj-food-heac.php](http://www.bmsg.org/proj-food-heac.php)
- The Center for Law and the Public's Health: Zoning and Obesity Project: [www.publichealthlaw.net/](http://www.publichealthlaw.net/)
- The Center for Science in the Public Interest: Menu Labeling Project: [www.cspinet.org/nutritionpolicy/index.html](http://www.cspinet.org/nutritionpolicy/index.html)
- **Fast food nutrition facts and restaurant finders:**  
[www.mcdonalds.com](http://www.mcdonalds.com)  
[www.yum.com](http://www.yum.com)  
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