



McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy's, Jack in the Box, and the rest of their fast-food family have been going lean for years. Is it paying off? To find out, we stepped up to the register and spoke to some of the country's leading nutritionists to get the answer to that eternal question:

Can Fast Food Be Fit?

By Linda Villarosa | Illustration by Danny Hellman

Back in the day, when you walked into a fast-food restaurant you didn't have to ask, "Where's the beef?" At McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy's, and their various brethren, what you saw—and smelled—was exactly what you got: beefy burgers (the more patties the better), thin, crispy, salty golden fries, and a triple-thick shake finished off with fried apple pie. No need to feel bad about it, either. But that's not the case anymore.

Between reams of supersized bad press and a burgeoning love for fitness, the traditional burger-and-fries joints have wised up over the last decade. Alongside triple bacon cheeseburgers and monster fries, the nation's fast-food chains began offering healthier options, such as salads, wraps, veggie burgers, fruit, and even yogurt parfait.

Salads landed on fast-food menus about five years ago and now just about every restaurant offers them. But are these “healthier” menu items really better for you? And more importantly: Are we even buying them?

The answer to both questions? Not so much. Despite health warnings, Americans are still eating more fast food than ever. According to the NPD Group, a research company that tracks the food industry, a whopping 77% of all meals bought in the U.S. are purchased at what’s called a “quick-service restaurant.” That’s up from 73% in 1994. “The driving force behind our eating habits is time and money,” says NPD Vice President Harry Balzer. “That’s what fast food offers: high speed and low cost.”

This quick fix is especially inviting to men—fit men, alas. “Fast food strongly appeals to guys, particularly those who are working out,” says Hope Warshaw, R.D., author of the books *What to Eat When You Are Eating Out* and *Eat Out, Eat Right*. “It’s the easy choice. You’re burning a lot of calories, you’re hungry, you want something fast, you don’t want to cook, and there it is.”

This isn’t the first time fast-food chains have jumped on the healthy bandwagon. Wendy’s, founded in 1969, was the first to offer salad bars and a grilled chicken sandwich, which hatched in 1990. Others chains quickly followed and threw a few healthy offerings on their own menus. In 1991, McDonald’s tested the waters with a burger called the McLean; and Taco Bell, in 1995, introduced its Border Lights, lower-fat line. Both flopped, and ultimately disappeared with a whimper.

But this time around, the pressure is much greater. As diet and weight-related diseases like diabetes reach epidemic numbers, health advocates have become more vocal. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that a third of all American adults—72 million—are obese, a percentage that has doubled since the mid-70s. Our growing addiction to fast food has taken the fall—fair or not. “You can’t place all the blame for America’s health problems on the fast-food industry,” says Steven G. Aldana, Ph.D., author of *The Stop and Go Fast Food Nutrition Guide*. “But there’s also no doubt that it is a big factor in chronic illnesses like heart disease and diabetes.”

Just don’t credit that desire to become healthy to altruism. “The fast-food industry is responding to negative press and consumer and government pressure,” says Warshaw. “These chains are run by business people, not do-gooders. They didn’t want to make these healthier changes; they had to. It was face-saving.”

But now that fast-food restaurants have brought on the salad, are we eating it? Unfortunately, not as much as we should be. Healthy items are definitely not driving the gains in fast-food sales. Burgers remain king. NPD statistics show they’re the No. 1 menu item and nearly five times more popular than salads. “When people go to a fast-food restaurant, they want to eat junk,” says Lisa R. Young, Ph.D., R.D., a nutrition consultant and New York University adjunct professor. “Those who are into healthy food aren’t saying, ‘Hey, let’s go to McDonald’s and have a salad.’”

That said, fast-food franchises haven’t raked in billions by ignoring statistics and turning their backs on consumer demand. Their goal is to get bodies (of all sizes) in the door by offering something for everyone. In general, Americans like fast, cheap, and hearty, and now some of us also want something healthy. “Fast-food chains deserve credit for their healthy choices,” says Jayne Hurley, R.D., senior nutritionist at the Center for Science in the Public Interest in Washington, D.C. “However, at the same time the companies upgraded their salads, the burgers got bigger. Who needs four big patties of meat with several slices of cheese, drenched in some kind of mystery sauce? The chains are trying to cover all the bases.”

Portion sizes have also grown even as prices, in some cases, have plummeted. The Dollar Menu in particular has been a boon for McDonald’s. “Everything has gotten bigger—

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Percentage of Americans who say they like the taste of fast food far too much to ever give it up, according to a recent study.

The Fittest (and Fattest) of the Fast What to order at The Big Three

Burger King

Top Picks

Whopper Junior
370 calories
21 g total fat
570 mg sodium

Hamburger
290 calories
12 g total fat
560 mg sodium

BK Veggie Burger
420 calories
16 g total fat
1,100 mg sodium

Fired Grilled Chicken Caesar w/o dressing
190 calories
7 g total fat
900 mg sodium

dressing adds 130 calories

Worst Choice

Triple Whopper w/ Cheese
1,230 calories
82 g total fat
1,590 mg sodium



McDonald's

Top Picks

Hamburger
250 calories
9 g total fat
520 mg sodium

Cheeseburger
300 calories
12 g total fat
750 mg sodium

Small French Fries
250 calories
13 g total fat
140 mg sodium

Grilled Chicken Snack Wrap w/ Honey Mustard
260 calories
9 g total fat
800 mg sodium

Think Outside the Bun

5 simple rules for making healthy choices when time is short

You're already ordering the diet soda. To make your fast-food meal even healthier, Hope Warshaw, R.D., a nutritionist based in Alexandria, Va., offers five more essential tips:

Study your options. Health advocates all across the U.S. are requesting legislation that would force chains to post calories and other nutrition facts on menus. Until that happens, many—including McDonald's and Burger King—are already providing the information on posters, tray liners, or on their Web sites. Check 'em out before you hit the drive-thru.

Splurge. More for less isn't always best. Meal "deals" can push you to eat larger portions. Order a la carte. Your wallet may be lighter, but so will your waist.


Stop supersizing. The only thing it will do is super-size your ass. To stay lean, embrace the words regular, junior, small, and single—and avoid large, jumbo, double, and triple.

Avoid the extras. Watch out for added toppings or "special sauces." Try lower-calorie ketchup, mustard, or barbecue sauce instead. If you absolutely need a burger with cheese, skip the bacon, mayo, and other fattening options, so you can at least taste the ingredients you really want.

"Stay," Don't "Go." Sure, sitting down with your meal may take a bit more time. But you'll eat less. When you drive and eat, you barely notice the food passing through your lips, and are much more likely to either overeat or be hungry sooner than if you sit down and enjoyed your meal like a civilized person.

blue moon, it doesn't matter what you order. But if you're eating every meal there, that's not a splurge. That's a steady diet of foods high in calories, saturated fat, and sodium."

It's also important to remember that not all fast food is created equal. The NPD's Balzer says he's keeping his eye on the growing number of fast casual restaurants like Baja Fresh, Cosi, and Chipotle that offer higher-priced but also better-quality food. "Fast casual dining accounts for about half of the share of the growth in the fast-food industry," says Balzer. "These restaurants offer fresher ingredients and overall healthier food."

Finally, remember that all the exercise in the world won't protect you from fast food or counteract an unhealthy diet. "If you're looking great and keeping active, that's half the equation," says Aldana. "It takes a good diet to make your body both strong and healthy." And that, as you now, doesn't come fast. 

burgers, fries, soda, shakes, you name it," says Young. "Portions are now two to five times larger than when the products were first introduced. Value meals are what's hot. You get a lot of food, but it feels like a bargain. It's easy for fast-food chains to offer more food for less money because food is cheap."

Eat and Run: How to Do it Right

Can you have a nutritious meal in a fast-food restaurant? Experts say yes. (*MF* even tells you how every month in our Fast Food Fix column, on page 22.) "It makes no sense to tell people not to eat fast food," says Warshaw. "This is people's reality. And fast food has its virtues. The chains offer a variety of different-size portions. You can't go into Applebee's or the Cheesecake Factory and choose the size burger you want like you can at a Wendy's or Burger King."

Ah, portion size. According to Young, there's no more important factor in eating fast and staying healthy. Take Jack in the Box. The Bacon Ultimate Cheeseburger weighs in at 1,090 calories compared to 350 for a hamburger with cheese. An order of Burger King's jumbo french fries has nearly three times more calories (600) than an order of small fries (230). "When you have the choice between small, medium, and large, it's simple—think small," she says. "Small portions are now bigger, so even if you choose the smaller size, you still get plenty of food."

With the healthy trend firmly in place—for now—take advantage of it. "There are things that are reasonable like grilled chicken and yogurt parfait," says Hurley. At Wendy's a baked potato topped with chili plus a side salad is filling but low cal (530 calories). McDonald's grilled chicken snack wrap has only 260 calories and 9 grams of fat, plus it costs only a little over a buck.

How about those salads? Hope you're sitting down: They aren't always the healthiest choice. Taco Bell's fiesta taco salad has more calories (840) than anything else on the menu. "Salads are only a healthy option as long as you look at what you're putting on top of them and how you're dressing them," says Warshaw.

And whatever you do, be careful not to go overboard. Studies show that, in general, when people eat out, they consume more fat, salt, and calories than at home. "When you go out, it feels like a splurge," says Hurley. "If you eat fast food once in a

Wendy's

Top Picks

Plain Baked Potato	
270	calories
0 g	total fat
25 mg	sodium

small chili adds 220 calories

Ultimate Chicken Grill	
320	calories
7 g	total fat
950 mg	sodium

Worst Choice

Baconator	
830	calories
51 g	total fat
1,920 mg	sodium

Fruit 'n Yogurt Parfait	
160	calories
2 g	total fat
85 mg	sodium

Worst Choice

Double Quarter Pounder w/ Cheese	
740	calories
42 g	total fat
1,380 mg	sodium

Men's Fitness

