



Fast Foods! What is a family to do?

Consumption of fast foods by children has increased five times since the late 1970s. In the late 1970s children received about 2 percent of daily meals from fast food which had increased to 10 percent by the mid 1990s. How does frequent use of fast food meals influence the nutrient intake of our children and youth?

A recent study looked at food intake data from 6,212 children (ages 4-19), collected in 1994-96 and 1998 by the United States Department of Agriculture. (Bowman SA et al. Pediatrics 2004;113(1):112-118.)

Children who ate fast food (compared to those who did not) were found to have the following intakes:

- Higher level of calorie intake
- More fat and saturated fat
- More total carbohydrate
- More added sugars
- More sweetened beverages
- Less milk, fiber, fruit, vegetables

This study confirms that utilizing fast food on a frequent basis does not provide the recommended nutrient intake for optimal growth and development of children. Elevated caloric intakes, unless balanced by increased activity, will result in increased body fat and weight.

In 2001, 1 out of 5 North Dakota high school youth were overweight or at-risk of overweight. Additional North Dakota data from 2003 reveals other information about

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MAY 2004

health related habits: <http://www.dpi.state.nd.us/health/index.shtml>

- Only 17% of North Dakota high school students received the recommended 5 or more fruits and vegetables per day.
- Only 1 out of 4 (26%) drank three or more glasses of milk each day.
- One out of two (50%) drank more than 12 oz of sweetened beverages each day.
- One out of two (47%) did not eat a meal with their family the previous day.
- More than half of the students (57%) watched more than 2 hours of TV or video games each day.
- About 6 out of 10 (63%) did not have a physical education class on a daily basis.
- About 3 out of 10 (37%) did not meet the minimum suggested amounts of physical activity (moderate or vigorous).

So the food intake and physical activity of our children and youth do not meet recommended levels to maintain a healthy weight. The greater reliance on fast food may be contributing to the increased prevalence of overweight.

Ideas to reduce reliance on fast foods

- Be aware of the negative health effects of regular use of fast foods.
- Make informed decisions about fast food by asking for nutrition information about menu offerings.
- Value good nutrition and make it a family priority.
- Plan ahead! Plan simple meals for week nights. Always include a fruit and a vegetable.
- Prepare main dish items on the weekend that can be frozen for a quick meal later in the week.
- Utilize a crock pot to start a meal before you go to work and have it ready when you get home.

For more information on this and other topics, see: www.ag.ndsu.edu

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