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Restaurant Children's Meals Have Too Much Fat

There has been a lot of concern and publicity recently concerning the number of children who are overweight. Excess weight as a child can easily lead to being overweight as an adult and becoming much more prone to heart disease, diabetes and high blood pressure.

Families eat out a lot more than they used to. An occasional meal out isn't a problem, but when families eat out frequently, parents need to develop a few strategies to keep everyone's diet on track, according to Dr. Karen Cullen, a research nutritionist with the USDA/ARS Children's Nutrition Research Center and an assistant professor of pediatrics at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston.

Restaurant, take-out and fast foods tend to be higher in fat and calories, and lower in fiber - there are few servings of fruit and vegetables. Temptations like super-sized portions, luscious desserts, and meal combos can quickly drive up fat and load on unneeded calories.

A "loaded" burger and "biggie" fries can easily have 1400 calories, 83 grams of fat and 2460 milligrams of sodium. This is way more than is healthy at one meal. The government recommendation for young children (four to eight) is 1500 calories a day, 17 grams of fat and 2400 mg. of sodium. It's no wonder that there are children who already have high cholesterol and/or high blood pressure!

Children do need whole grains. They do need fresh fruits and fresh vegetables. They do need a source of calcium for growing bones. They do need healthy sources of proteins, either from fish, poultry, eggs, meat or from plant sources. These foods give them the vitamins, minerals, and micronutrients they need to build quality bodies.

According to pediatrician Dr. Alan Greene, children do not need large amounts of fat – although fat by itself isn't quite the culprit that most people think. Fat in combination with simple carbohydrates (such as sugar, white flour, white rice, or potatoes) is far more dangerous than fat alone because the fat is handled by the body so differently. French fries, potato chips, cheeseburgers on white-flour buns, donuts, candy bars, and the like are particularly bad. Butter on vegetables is much better for us than butter on white toast. Children do not need partially hydrogenated anything. These artificial fats, so commonly found in items on grocery store shelves, and often used for frying foods by restaurants, are not found anywhere in nature. The partially hydrogenated fats are higher in saturated fat than cooking oils and also contain trans

fats - which can raise cholesterol levels the same as saturated fats can.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest did a study of children's meals at large chain restaurants. They found that kids' meals in sit-down restaurants primarily feature oversized portions of burgers, fries, and fried chicken fingers. Now, kids come to expect that kind of junk food at school and at home. If the restaurants offered child-size portions of the healthier adult offerings it would be better for the children.

Sit-down restaurants often have children's menus but the offerings are not necessarily more healthy than fast food choices. Legislation that would require large chain restaurants to print nutrition information on menus is pending in five states, the District of Columbia, and in the U.S. House of Representatives. Last month Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA) announced that he is introducing the Menu Education and Labeling Act (MEAL) in the Senate. Similar legislation was introduced in the House last year by Representative Rosa DeLauro (D-CT).

Having this information on the menus will help parents guide their children to healthier food choices. Restaurants provide lots of options to accommodate all types of eating plans, they just need to make sure there are healthy offerings for children too.

What can parents do? Eating habits on the home front can make a difference when eating out. If children are used to healthy choices at home, they are more likely to make healthy choices when eating out. If the foods available at home are healthy, kids will pick their favorite from among healthy choices.

When purchasing prepared foods look at the nutrition labeling to determine their calories and fat content. Try to purchase those with lower fat and sodium content. When buying breads and cereals look at the list of ingredients, if the first ingredient listed isn't whole wheat flour the product isn't a whole grain food.. Whole grain products offer more nutrients and fiber than those that are not whole grain.

When you are going to be eating out, try to plan around the higher fat meals. Have the other meals and snacks lower in fat to balance out the higher fat servings. It's what you eat over the course of several days that affects their nutritional well-being, not the content of one meal.

Give the children a healthy snack before they go out to eat so they are not famished when they get to the restaurant..

Set a good example. Decline offers to super-size. Balance high-calorie choices with lower calorie ones. Ask that dressings and high-fat spreads be served "on the side" or ask for low-fat versions. Stop eating when satisfied, and stay physically active.