

The Wellness Family

Dr. Gerken Keeps You Informed

The Fast Food Dilemma

It's six o'clock and you just picked up the kids from soccer practice, or perhaps you just got off work and picked up your children from day care; regardless, you're running late and you know that there's nothing prepared for dinner. The kids are asking for McDonald's again and perhaps you're thinking, "What's the harm? It's so much easier than going home and cooking. At this rate, we won't eat until seven. Yes, I think McDonald's is the answer." McDonald's is never the answer.

What's the Harm?

The American Psychological Association has recognized that there is more to our obesity problem than just genes or lack of exercise. In a recent article, Dr. Kelly Brownell said that the problem isn't so much a lack of self control as it is a "toxic food environment". Every street corner has an option for fast food and none of them are healthy. Obviously, we know this, but the convenience outweighs a critical concern for our daily dietary needs being met.

Of course, Brownell acknowledges that genes and self-control play a role in obesity, diabetes and the myriad of other health problems that result from unhealthy eating habits; but, in his view, both face a losing battle against the overabundance and availability of bad or unhealthy food choices.

Brownell is particularly concerned about the advertising allowed for fast food restaurants. Joe Camel has been taken off billboards because of his obvious negative influence on our children and yet Ronald McDonald and his friends are considered cute so they take a starring role in commercials broadcast when children are most likely to be watching TV. "How different are they in their impact," Brownell challenges, "In what they're trying to get kids to do?"

High-fat, high-sugar and high-calorie abound, serving sizes keep increasing and, thanks to the drive-thru, the exercise we might have gotten by getting out of our cars and walking into the eating establishment has even been eliminated. In this western culture of convenience, it's become too easy to give up on being healthy and just eat whatever we can get our hands on the fastest with no regard for the future health problems that will arise. Of course, diabetes and high blood pressure have become the least of our concerns.

Trans-Fats

"If fast food is bad, then trans-fat is evil," writes Guto Harri in a recent article from the BBC News. Trans-fats increase the damaging cholesterol content of a meal, clog arteries and increase the risk of heart attack.

Partially hydrogenated vegetable oils or trans-fats:

- Turn oily foods into semi-solid foods (Oreo cookie filling, etc.)
- Extend the shelf life of products
- Are put in pastries, margarine and fast foods
- Have no nutritional benefit



"The problem isn't so much a lack of self-control as it is a 'toxic food environment'..."

Obviously, the growing concern about premature death and rising obesity has made trans-fats a major target. It's been determined that even a small reduction in the daily consumption of trans-fats can significantly cut the risk for heart disease and can help lower the levels of "bad" cholesterol.

This concern has been made known to all of the major fast food chains and yet only a few have done something about it. Wendy's quit using cooking oil containing trans-fats in the summer of 2006 and, by April of 2007, all Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurants will have ceased their use. McDonalds promised to reduce trans-fats in its products over four years ago and "aims to roll-out a new cooking oil" this year. Still, trans-fats aren't the end of the fast food story.

Cancer Risk

The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM) has recently filed suit against seven major restaurants and fast food chains in the state of California. They include: McDonald's, Burger King,

continued on page 2

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Page 1 The Fast Food Dilemma

continued from page 1

Chick-fil-A, Chili's, Applebee's, Outback Steakhouse and TGI Friday's. The reason for the suit, these companies are knowingly serving food containing carcinogens without a health warning to the consumer.

PCRM commissioned an independent laboratory to test grilled chicken products from California outlets of all seven chains. PhIP (one of a group of carcinogenic compounds called heterocyclic amines) was found in every grilled chicken sample provided for testing.

Heterocyclic amines were added to the list of known carcinogens in 2005 and PhIP, specifically, has been on the California governor's list of chemicals known to cause cancer for more than a decade.

"Grilled chicken can cause cancer, and consumers deserve to know that this supposedly healthy product is actually just as bad for them as high-fat fried chicken," says PCRM president Neal Barnard, M.D. "Even a grilled chicken salad increases the risk of breast cancer, prostate cancer and other forms of this lethal disease."

What was once considered the healthy option on the average fast food menu has become the deadliest.

So, what do we do?

It's time to consider that the only way that fast food restaurants will start sharing our growing concern for healthier eating choices is if we stop buying their products. It's time to seriously consider the risk to ourselves and our children and weigh those risks against the "convenience" being offered by "fast food".

We have other options. Fast food is not our only choice.

- Always at the top of the list is the deli counter at your local grocery store. Most delis now offer rotisserie chickens for a reasonable price, homemade soups by the pint and bags of prepared tossed green salad.

- Of course, remember that the greener the salad the better; iceberg lettuce is mostly water and has little or no nutritional value
- Another great idea is to talk with a friend or parent who loves to cook about preparing meals in advance for your family. Some of the most time consuming steps to cooking can be done in advance (chopping vegetables, etc.)
 - You can offer to pay or barter for this service, or your mother may want the excuse to see the grandkids once a week and prep meals that feed more than two

In Summary

It's too easy to give in to the pressure of "there isn't enough time to fix a healthy meal". Yet the facts are clear: fast food cannot be an option.

Consider the following ideas for healthier eating:

- Prepare a menu each week and stick to it
- Sunday should be "prep day": chop vegetables and prepare casseroles then freeze them for future use
- Consider purchasing prepared meats (boneless skinless chicken breast, etc.) that can be defrosted and quickly prepared
- The Crockpot is gaining popularity again and healthy recipes aren't hard to find. Prep the food in the morning and when you get home from work, dinner is ready to serve.

For more information please visit:

Whole Foods Recipe Site: www.wholefoodsmarket.com/recipes/

For Healthy Crockpot Recipes search busycooks.about.com

For overall healthier meal planning and great recipes search www.cookinglight.com

Dear Parent,

Dr. Gerken is dedicated to providing you with the absolute best in family wellness care. Take a moment today to ask your Family Wellness Chiropractor about healthier eating habits for your family.

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