

 

(Nov. 8) -- You might have thought that with all the finger-pointing and concerns over childhood plumpness, America's fast-food industry would be trying to reduce the gut-busting, calorie-loaded, fat-filled offerings on their menus and the kid-targeted advertising.

Not so, say researchers from Yale University's Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity who released today what they say is the "most comprehensive study of fast-food nutrition and marketing ever conducted."

The researchers studied marketing efforts of 12 of the nation's largest fast-food chains, and examined the calories, fat, sugar and sodium in more than 3,000 kids' meal combinations and 2,781 menu items.

"Despite pledges to improve their marketing practices, fast-food companies seem to be stepping up their efforts to target kids," said Jennifer L. Harris, the report's lead researcher. "Today, preschoolers see 21 percent more fast-food ads on TV than they saw in 2003, and somewhat older children see 34 percent more."

The report also found:

- \* Out of 3,039 possible kids' meal combinations, only 12 meet the researchers' nutrition criteria for preschoolers. Only 15 meet nutrition criteria for older children.
- \* Teens ages 13-17 purchase 800-1,100 calories in an average fast-food meal, roughly half of their recommended total daily calories.
- \* At most fast-food restaurants, a single meal contains at least half of young people's daily recommended sodium.

A detailed analysis of the study's methodology is available on the Rudd Center's website.

McDonald's spokesperson Neil Golden said this morning that the company "remains committed to responsible marketing practices ... and ... to offering our customers a wide variety of quality food and beverage choices that meet their dietary needs and tastes -- including fruit, juice and dairy options in our Happy Meals."

A spokesperson for the National Restaurant Association echoed Golden's defense, without directly addressing the results of the study. Sue Hensley also noted that the industry supported the law that will "soon require calories on the menu in 200,000 restaurant locations nationwide."

Beyond the Yale report, AOL News researched the breakdown of calories in the kids meals and found these totals at the websites of the largest fast food chains:

- McDonald's -- Happy Meal cheeseburger, low-fat chocolate milk and small fries, 650 calories.
- Wendy's -- Cheeseburger, Kids' Meal fries and a low-fat chocolate milk, 650 calories.
- Jack in the Box -- Kids Meals cheeseburger, small fries and low fat chocolate milk, 800 calories.
- Burger King -- Kids Meal small cheeseburger, small fries and a low-fat chocolate milk, 820 calories.
- KFC -- Kid-size popcorn chicken, potato wedges and lemonade, 750 calories.

The number of calories are often doubled or tripled by substituting other menu selections, AOL News was told when it checked with managers and counter people at the five chains in Seattle. The consensus among those interviewed was that kids 8 and older rarely go for these smaller portions, with large fries, sodas and bigger hamburgers more the norm, especially if their parents were not doing the ordering.

What is the federal government doing to thwart spreading juvenile waistlines? Its schizophrenic approach confounds many nutritionists and public health experts.

Sunday's New York Times detailed a bizarre operation where a U.S. Department of Agriculture dairy promotion group funded a \$12 million campaign to develop and market a new Domino's pizza pie that has six cheeses on top and two more in the crust where "one slice contains as much as two-thirds of a day's maximum recommended amount of saturated fat."

Yet another arm of the USDA, its Center for Nutrition Policy and

Promotion, is urging consumers to reduce the consumption of these calories-filled, high fat cheeses.<br /><br />On a local level, however, San Francisco's Board of Supervisors last week did attempt to take the happy out of happy meals when it approved an ordinance that would prevent fast-food chains from giving away toys with children's meals that are overloaded with calories, salt and fat. It also decreed that any meals accompanied by promotional toys has to be served with fruits or vegetables.<br /><br />If San Francisco's mayor doesn't veto the slimming legislation, it would become law in December.<br /><br />Just after the vote, a McDonald's spokeswoman told reporters that the company was extremely disappointed with the decision. "It's not what our customers want, nor is it something they asked for," she said.<br /><br />Today's Yale report makes it clear that the fast-food industry shouldn't protest too much about the criticism.<br /><br />In one example, the researchers say that companies facing increasing pressure about portion sizes are renaming, rather than eliminating, their biggest sides and drinks. They cited Burger King where they found that a 42-ounce "King" drink is now the "large" option; the former "large" 32-ounce drink is now a "medium"; the former "medium" 21-ounce drink is now a "small"; and the former "small" 16-ounce drink is now the "value" option.<br /><br />The nutrition specialists also explained how race guides advertising efforts, reporting that McDonald's is responsible for one-quarter of young people's exposure to Spanish-language, fast-food advertising. African-American children and teens, the study concludes, see at least 50 percent more fast-food ads than their white peers, with "McDonald's and KFC, in particular, specifically target African-American youth with TV advertising, targeted websites, and banner ads."<br /><br />Study co-author Kelly Brownell says the results of their research show that the fast-food industry's promises to market less unhealthy food to young people are not enough.<br /><br />"If they truly wish to be considered partners in public health, fast-food restaurants need to drastically reduce the total amount of marketing that children and teens see for fast food and the iconic brands that sell it," Brownell said.<br /><br />The detailed findings of this study will be presented in Denver today during the American Public Health Association's annual meeting.</p><p align="justify">Source:<br /><a href="http://www.aolnews.com/health/article/report-fast-food-chains-increase-targeting-of-kids/19706296?a\_dgi=aolshare\_email">http://www.aolnews.com/health/article/report-fast-food-chains-increase-targeting-of-kids/19706296?a\_dgi=aolshare\_email</a><br /></p><p align="justify">◆</p>