



FAST FOODS

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The Modern era started with controversial socioeconomic trends like long working hours and more working women, which have changed the ways of providing meals to family. Nowadays fast foods are becoming more feasible choice because of quick service, good taste and easy availability especially during travelling. With the passage of time, it seems the thing which was once considered luxury is becoming the necessity.

The term, Junk food, is commonly associated with fast foods. Junk food is simply an empty calorie food that is rich in high calories but lack essential nutrients like vitamins, minerals and amino acids¹. Although junk food has negative connotation, not all fast food items available in restaurants contribute to adverse outcomes associated with fast food. There is no such thing as bad food; actually there are some foods which should not be used as a part of routine. Influence of fast foods on nutritional status depends upon these main factors:

- 1) The nutritive quality of a meal
- 2) The choice of menu items
- 3) The amount utilized
- 4) The frequency of meals consumed

Most of fast foods are energy dense, have higher levels of total and trans fats, added sugar and sodium and low in vitamin A, C, folic acid, fiber and calcium. In some fast foods, fats contribute to 45 to 55 % of energy which should be ≤ 30 % of total calories². Trans fats are added to fast foods to help them last longer but these increase LDL and lower HDL³. Some fast foods are made from red meat and cheese which contain naturally occurring saturated fats. Sugar is added in almost every item from sauces and dressings to butter and bread. Regular and increased consumption of sugar is linked to increased risk of obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular diseases. Salt (sodium) in fast foods is used as a preservative to increase shelf life and enhance taste. One fast food meal may contain up to 1300 mg which is more than half of daily recommended dose (2300 mg). Some chemicals like propylene glycol (stabilizes moisture), sodium nitrite (preservative for meat), synthetic food dyes, ammonium sulfate (dough enhancer) and fillers like cellulose, olestra and potassium bromate (thickening of meat and bread) are added in fast foods which not only compromise the nutritional quality of food but can even be harmful⁴.

Energy dense foods and sedentary life style is creating an 'obesogenic environment' as evident by increasing epidemic of obesity worldwide⁵. Frequent consumption of fast foods not only affects nutrition but also develops poor eating habits, as a survey showed that parents who reported the purchase of fast foods more than 3 times a week for family were significantly

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more likely to ask for soft drinks and French fries in home as compared to less frequent consumers of fast ².

Eliminating fast food altogether may not be realistic. But it is an important issue as healthy dietary patterns in childhood are linked to reduction of several diseases like obesity, hypertension, diabetes, coronary artery disease, osteoporosis and diet related cancers in later life ². Limiting child targeted fast food advertisements on televisions, modifying marketing techniques for branding a high quality food and educational strategies like making films as an example; Super size me, may help limit fast food consumption. The real challenge is to teach and educate our kids to make prudent selection of a meal while visiting any fast food establishment.

Many fast food chains have updated their menus to include healthier options, unlike in the past when choices were limited to hamburgers, pizzas, French fries and cold drinks. Following foods may provide healthier nutrients that were present in relatively lower amounts in traditional fast foods:

- Baked potato – Vitamin C and fiber
- Vegetables (raw and cooked) – Vitamins A and C and fiber
- Side salads and salad bars – Vitamins A and C and fiber
- Fresh fruit – Vitamins A and C and fiber
- Whole wheat buns – B vitamins and fiber
- Grilled chicken and lean red meats – Iron and zinc
- Chili – Fiber, zinc, folic acid, and iron
- Low-fat frozen yogurt, yogurt shakes, and low-fat milk – Calcium

- Orange juice – Folic acid and vitamin C

Though lower calories menu are not necessarily healthier, however calorie count may be helpful in deciding fewer meal options. Try to choose fast food establishments that post calorie and nutrients information prominently on their Menu. A large hamburger provides 540 kcal and 28 grams of fat compared with 250 kcal and 8 grams of fat in a regular hamburger. Similarly, a large-size order of French fries, large soft drink, and dessert can add about 1030 kcal more. Such a meal can provide 1570 kcal and 62 grams of fat, which is approximately 80 percent of total daily energy needs and 100 percent of daily fat needs for a 13-year-old child². Before placing an order, make sure it consists of boiled, steamed or grilled items instead of fried ones. Choose baked potatoes, fruits or steamed vegetables instead of French fries. Prefer broth based soups like chicken noodles over cream based cheese soups. Order smaller entrées; don't fall for deals like value box. If you want a deal eat only half and save rest for next meal. Look for the healthier side options like salad, fruits steamed vegetables, soup instead for fries. Choose plain water or low fat milk instead of soft drinks. Fast foods are known as meal on the go. People eat in their cars or while doing other activities like watching television. Enjoy the meals, distraction leads to overeating.

In short, eat healthy and live healthy. To eat a healthy fast food, educating the consumers and pressurizing the manufacturers to display the accurate nutritional information about any meal in the menu is necessary.

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