

The background of the page is filled with various line-art illustrations of fast-food items. At the top right, there is a large burger with lettuce, tomato, and cheese. Below it is a slice of Swiss cheese. To the right of the main title is another burger with a sesame seed bun. At the bottom right, there is a large serving of french fries in a paper cone. At the bottom center, there is a bunch of leafy greens. On the left side, there are illustrations of french fries, a hot dog in a bun, and several slices of pizza. The background also features abstract shapes in yellow and teal.

Navigating

# FAST FOOD

with  
Children

*by Alicia Tucker, MD, FAAP, Dipl. Of ABOM*

Can fast food be good for kids? The short answer is no. In general, fast-food meals are much higher in fat, sugar and salt than meals cooked at home. So you never take your kids to a fast-food restaurant? Of course I do! As a parent, between all my kid's activities, playdates and food cravings we certainly find ourselves needing to order a quick meal some days.

# Fast Food – An Occasional **TREAT**

Chances are you and your family have also found yourself trying to decide what to eat with hungry kids in tow. Fast-food restaurants are part of our American food landscape, part of your kid's social life and sometimes part of a fun family activity. I don't want anybody to feel guilty about the occasional trip to the drive-thru. What I worry about is the one-third of American kids who eat fast food nearly every day. Children who eat fast food take in about 120 calories more that day on average, and they are less likely to eat many fruits and vegetables. There are ways to incorporate fast food into your kids' lives, but just like ice cream or cake, those nuggets and fries should also be thought of as an occasional treat.

## What Can I Do to Keep My Child **HEALTHY?**

There are many ways that you can keep your child healthy, with or without fast food. Let's explore some of the options:

### Cut Back

First, what can you do if you, like many American parents, are currently purchasing a fast-food meal 2 ½ times per week? The first thing that you can do is try and cut that back to once a week. Children are at risk for many of the same health conditions older family members may already be getting treatment for – high blood pressure, high cholesterol, type 2 diabetes – and limiting high-calorie ultra-processed foods is an important part of prevention.

### Meal Prep

Take some extra time to prep meals on the weekends so you won't be caught off guard during the week. Next time you're cooking make extra so that you can freeze it; you'll have your own homemade frozen meal ready to pop in the microwave when everyone is home late. Having meals prepped ahead of time not only saves time that day but also makes it easier to say "no" when a voice in the backseat asks for a hamburger on the drive home. I always recommend having an emergency snack handy, especially for parents of young kids. If your child skipped school lunch or you hit traffic on the way home, having a healthy non-perishable snacks in your bag or car, such as popcorn or raisins can be a life-saver and will buy you the extra time to get home without feeling like you're in a food emergency.



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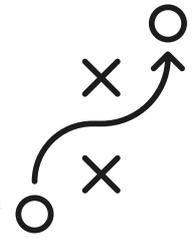
“ Lemonade and iced tea can often seem like healthier alternatives but many of these brands have just as much sugar as soda, with some brands of sweet iced tea having more! ”

## Find Healthy ALTERNATIVES

What if you forgot to pack lunch after soccer practice, you're on a road trip, or you just need a Friday night off from cooking? Healthy alternatives are becoming increasingly available, even if they're not always as visible. And there's always room for an occasional treat as long as it's balanced with healthy foods throughout the week. Here are my tips for how to leave a fast-food restaurant without guilt:

### 1. Make a Game Plan:

This is especially important with younger children. The marketing and advertising in fast-food and chain restaurants are geared toward kids and it's hard to say no once you're inside. Before going in, make a plan to let them choose what their treat will be and how they will balance it with a healthier option. It lets them enjoy eating out and lets you keep some control of their choices. Do you want a grilled chicken sandwich with fries, or do you want the fried chicken strips with apple slices? More and more fast-food restaurants are offering healthy alternatives to kid's meals like cut-up fruit, low-fat dairy or side salads. Managing your child's expectations is half the battle.



### 2. Pass on the Soda:

This is a great place to make a healthy swap. The average kids' size soda is about 150 calories, with all of those coming from sugar. Depending on the brand, there are about 8-10 teaspoons of sugar in that cup. Unflavored water or white milk are going to be the healthiest options. Juice is another option but remember that even though it comes from the fruit, it's still a sugary drink. Most of the nutrition is in the fruit itself, so it's always better to opt for apple slices instead of apple juice. In general, juice should be limited to about 4-6oz per day for children under 6 and 8oz per day for older children and teens. Lemonade and iced tea can often seem like healthier alternatives but many of these brands have just as much sugar as soda, with some brands of sweet iced tea having more!

### 3. Be a Healthy Eater Too:

We know our kids are always watching us, and what we do can be more important than what we say. I find this is especially true around eating habits. Making different rules around food for different household members can lead children to internalize negative feelings about their body image and eating behaviors. All kids in the family should be encouraged to choose healthy options regardless of their weight. Staying consistent helps to make sure all kids understand that healthy eating is something the whole family does together. Let them see you also order the grilled option or choose water with your meal. You can share less healthy options too, which helps with portion control for you and your child. Pick fresh fruit for one side and French fries for another and you can share them both. As your kids get older, seeing how you navigate a menu will help them learn this skill when they are out on their own.





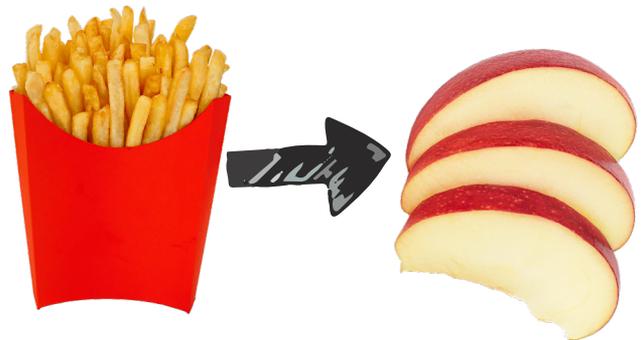
#### 4. Be a Savvy Shopper:

Most fast-food restaurants have expanded their kid's menus to include healthier options. Chick-fil-A, Subway, McDonald's and Wendy's offer fruit as a side with their kid's meals. Subway sandwiches are ranked as one of the healthiest kid's meals when paired with apple slices and juice or milk. Chipotle and Taco Bell both offer bowls which are packed with options for healthy proteins and vegetables. Chicken tenders or chicken nuggets are ranked the most-popular kid's meal item, but grilled options are becoming more popular. Chick-fil-A offers a grilled nugget option and Wendy's has a grilled chicken wrap. KFC kid's meal options include grilled chicken and have the option of vegetables like green beans or slaw on the side. McDonald's happy meals have also gotten an upgrade, the chicken nuggets or hamburger happy meal paired with apple slices and milk comes in around 475 calories. No matter where you end up going for fast food, a good rule of thumb is to stick with the kid's meal to control portions, go for the non-fried option and pair it with at least one fruit or vegetable.

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## Conclusion



Fast food isn't bad for you if it is in moderation! It's important to keep our children healthy, but that doesn't have to be difficult. Cutting back on fast food and knowing the healthy alternatives to highly processed, fried foods are easy ways to ensure your children are getting proper nutrients and staying healthy.

#### **About the Author:**

*Alicia Tucker, MD, FAAP, Dipl. of ABOM, is a pediatrician with the IDEAL clinic, a medical weight management program at Children's National in Washington DC. Dr. Tucker is also an assistant professor of pediatrics at the George Washington University College of Medicine where she participates in medical student education and research around the prevention and improved management of childhood obesity and diet-related chronic disease.*



# ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



VIBRANT COMMUNITY



NATIONAL AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS



ANNUAL CONVENTION



ADVOCACY



PUBLIC EDUCATION

## LEARN, CONNECT, ENGAGE

The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

### Through the OAC Community, you can get access to:

- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
  - Community Discussion Forum
  - Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
- AND MUCH MORE**



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