

By Barbara Holden

America's chain and fast food restaurants may be child-friendly, fun and easy on your wallet. But make no mistake – they are by no means easy on your overall health.

According to a new study by the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), children consume twice as many calories when they eat a meal at a restaurant compared to a meal at home, and they get more saturated fat and less fiber and calcium than in home-cooked meals.

CSPI researchers assessed the nutritional quality of children's meals at the 25 largest chain restaurants in the country, testing all available "kids' meal" combinations. The results were astounding.

"Ninety-three percent of 1,474 possible choices at 13 chains exceed 430 calories -- that is one-third of what the Institute of Medicine recommends that children aged four through eight should consume in a day," reports the CSPI.

"Despite the fact that obesity rates have tripled in children over the last two decades, chain restaurants continue to offer primarily high calorie meals for children."

The CSPI even created a restaurant Hall of Shame, which includes family favorites like Chili's, KFC, Burger King and Sonic, with some children's offerings racking up as many as 1020 calories in just one meal.

Of course, that's no surprise when you consider that the top three offerings on most children's menus are fried chicken, burgers, grilled cheese and macaroni and cheese.

Although the report praises a few chains like Subway, Denny's and Arby's for their healthier menus, the burden is still on the parents to find them.

"There are some healthier meals, entrees, side items and beverages. However, parents have to navigate a minefield of calories, fat and salt to find them."

If it seems like this entire chain restaurant situation sets parents up for failure, well, that's because it does.

Children are notoriously picky eaters. Once that little mind has determined that tater tots and mac and cheese are the only two acceptable food groups, it can cause quite a scene when a parent says "no."

So what are you supposed to do? Certainly eating out is a fun treat for your family, and burgers and fries have their place. But it's up to the parent to pair entrees and meals with healthy side items and beverages in order to keep a children's meal from becoming a fatty feast.

Lona Sandon, MEd, RD, assistant professor at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas and national spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association recently shared this tip with WebMD, “Choose low-fat or skim milk, or 100% fruit juice, over other beverages that simply provide calories without nutritional value.”

Additionally, many restaurants will substitute applesauce fries if you request it. You can plan ahead and take raisins or other fruit snacks to replace the ice cream many restaurants include in a child’s meal. Also, sandwiches can be ordered on pita and wheat bread, rather than white bread and buns.

The CSPI report makes a plea for fast food and restaurant chains to set families up for success with a complete overhaul of existing menu items to reduce overall calories, fat, and sodium and to increase options such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.

The group also asks restaurants to make fruit or vegetables and low-fat milk or water the default side dishes instead of french fries and soda for the kids' meals. That’s because 70% of parents stick with healthy options for meals when they are the default offering on the menu.

The bottom line: until healthy choices are the norm at chains and fast food restaurants, it’s the parents and grandparents responsibility to consistently pick healthy foods, side items and beverages for our children and for ourselves. So, choose wisely and eat up!

Barbara Holden is a director at the Urban Child Institute, a Greater Memphis organization dedicated to promoting early childhood development. The Commercial Appeal is a partner with the Urban Child Institute in this effort to help parents and other caregivers learn skills that nurture and educate the minds of infants and children. For more information, go to theurbanchildinstitute.org or dial 211 for the Public Library and Information Center.