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BECAUSE EVERY CHIROPRACTOR NEEDS A HAND.

The Fast-Food Dilemma: Trans Fats and Cancer Risks

by Claudia Anrig, DC

One would have thought that with all the media attention about the negative impact of a fast-food lifestyle, parents would decrease their visits to the drive-through windows. The opposite is true: Maybe parents have changed some habits by not “super-sizing” their child’s meal, but the average parent truly doesn’t see the harm of the fast-food ritual.

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 the problem isn’t so much a lack of self-control as it is a “toxic-food environment.” Every street corner has the option of fast food, and none of them is healthy. We obviously know this, but the convenience outweighs a critical concern for our daily dietary needs being met.

Of course, Dr. 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. However, in his view, both face a losing battle against the overabundance and availability of bad food choices.

Brownell particularly is 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 most likely are 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-through, even the exercise we might have gotten by getting out of our cars and walking into the eating establishment has 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 – and fast – with no regard for the future health problems that will arise.

Trans Fats

“If fast-food is bad, then trans-fat is evil,” writes Guto Harri in a BBC News article. 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, cakes, margarine and fast foods; and
- have no nutritional benefit.

This concern has been made known to all 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. McDonald's 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 even our worst concern for our children.

Cancer Risk

The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM) recently filed suit against seven major restaurants and fast-food chains in the state of California. They include: McDonald's, Burger King, Chick-fil-A, Chili's, Applebee's, Outback Steakhouse and T.G.I. Friday's. The reason for the suit? These companies are knowingly serving food containing carcinogens without a health warning to the consumer.

The 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, MD. "Even a grilled chicken salad increases the risk of breast cancer, prostate cancer and other forms of this lethal disease."

Recommendations for Busy Parents or Anyone On-the-Go

It's time to consider that the only way fast-food restaurants will start sharing our growing concern for healthier eating choices is if we stop going. 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 the only choice for busy parents. If you have a busy life and can't believe there are other options, I suggest the following:

- Most delicatessens now offer rotisserie chickens for a reasonable price, homemade soups by the pint and bags of prepared tossed green salad and prepped veggies.
- Another great idea is to talk with a friend (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 pay or barter for this service. Ask a grandmother who may want the excuse to see her grandkids to come once a week and prep meals that feed more than two.
- Prepare a menu each week and stick to it.
- Sunday should be "prep day." Chop vegetables and prepare meals that can be frozen for future use.
- Consider purchasing prepared meats (boneless, skinless chicken breast, etc.) that can be defrosted and broiled or baked.
- The slow cooker (Crock-Pot) is gaining popularity again with families, 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.
- Web sites for recipe information: Whole Foods recipe site: www.wholefoodsmarket.com/recipes. For healthy Crock-Pot recipes: busycooks.about.com. For overall healthier meal planning and great recipes: www.cookinglight.com.

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