

The facts behind fast food

We investigate the image versus the reality of the not-so-happy meals

We are getting fatter. In England, obesity has tripled since 1980, and nearly one third of children aged two to 15 are now classed as overweight or obese. Over the same period, our love affair with fast food and takeaways has grown as quickly as our waistlines: on average, more than 3,300 transactions occur every minute in the UK. Burger King, KFC, McDonald's and Pizza Hut are the four fast-food chains that dominate the market in this country.

Of course, fast food is not solely to blame for the epidemic of obesity – it's a complex problem with no single solution. But after criticism that the food they sell is bad for us, fast-food chains are trying

Nearly one third of children aged two to 15 are overweight or obese

to improve their image. Their menus now include healthier options such as fruit bags, semi-skimmed organic milk, salads and freshly-baked baguettes.

We've tested a range of food from the big four companies to see how the nutritional reality measures up to the healthy hype. And after criticisms that the companies' marketing strategies are often aimed at children, we've also talked to primary- and secondary-school students to see what they think about fast food.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH FAST FOOD?

'Our menu is based on staple foods such as meat, fish, potatoes, eggs, milk and grain' claims the McDonald's website. So why did the judge in a US obesity lawsuit describe McDonald's chicken nuggets as 'a McFrankenstein creation of various elements not utilised by the home cook'?

Fast-food companies may start out with simple, wholesome ingredients, but turning them into nuggets or cheeseburgers means long lists of additives and a lack of important nutrients. Amanda Johnson from the British Dietetic Association warns: 'Some fast-food choices can be high in fat, sugar and calories and low in important nutrients, such as fibre, vitamins and minerals.'

The other problem with fast food is its 'high energy density'. In other words, it's got lots of

calories for the size of the meal. For example, per 100g, there are 129 calories in a typical roast dinner and 106 calories in a home-made spaghetti bolognese – compared with a whopping average of 274 calories in the fast-food meals we tested (see table, opposite).

Nutritionists and dietitians are concerned that this can fool us into eating many more calories than we should, because our brains assess food by portion size rather than energy content.

Fast-food chains now offer healthier options, such as salads and baguettes. But even these aren't always as healthy as they look. For example, of all the food we tested from KFC and McDonald's, the salads contained the most salt per portion.

NUTRITIONAL INFORMATION

If customers can't tell what's in the food or how many calories it has, they need accurate information to help them choose. Burger King, KFC, McDonald's and Pizza Hut all put nutritional information on their websites, although some are more comprehensive and easier to navigate than others. We found mistakes on Burger King's website, but the company quickly rectified them when we notified it.

At the end of October, McDonald's announced that from 2006 it will start labelling its food with nutritional information. Icons on the packaging will show how much sodium (which indicates salt), carbohydrate, protein, fat and calories the food contains. While we welcome this move, we think that it would be more helpful if McDonald's and other chains prominently displayed this information in their outlets so customers can see it before they choose their food – not afterwards. None of the big four chains currently does this.

We also want the industry to adopt a consistent, government-endorsed scheme giving information on the amount of fat, sugar and salt in foods. Simplified schemes are useful, but lots of different systems will make customers even more confused.

FAULTY FIGURES

If companies give nutritional information, it must be accurate. But our testing found that some food had higher levels of calories, fat, saturated fat and salt than claimed.

TAKE ISSUE

What do you think about fast-food companies? Should they be allowed to market unhealthy food to children?

Email your experiences and views on this or any other topic in *Which?* to letters@which.co.uk.

We'll print some in the magazine and more online at www.which.co.uk/whicheextra.

Facts and figures

The table shows our test results on food from the big four chains. We've shown our results starting with the highest calories per portion.

As well as counting calories, we assessed the amount of fat and salt. In

the table we show these levels per 100g so you can compare foods with each other and with food you buy in a supermarket. But we've also highlighted items that contain high levels of salt, saturated fat and total fat per portion.

KEY

Items highlighted are high in salt or fat per portion

- 1.5g or more salt
- 6g or more saturated fat
- 21g or more total fat

Fast-food nutrients

Fast-food nutrients	Portion	Amounts per 100g			Calories (kcal)	
	Weight (g)	Salt (g)	Saturated fat (g)	Total fat (g)	Per 100g	Per portion
BURGER KING						
Whopper and Regular Fries	390	1	4.9	12	242	944
Monterey Melt Baguette	224	1.2	6.1	15.1	282	632
Chicken BLT Baguette	232	1.7	2.5	13.1	268	622
Piri Piri Chicken Baguette	222	1.7	0.5	2.3	203	451
Cajun Chicken Grill Baguette	213	1.4	0.9	3.6	186	396
Warm Flame Grilled Chicken Salad	237	0.6	0.3	1.2	65	154
Garden Salad	165	0.1	trace	0.6	29	48
KFC						
Colonel's Chicken Fillet Burger and Regular Fries	300	0.9	2.6	9.8	246	738
Colonel's Crispy Strips (3) and Regular Fries	231	1.4	1.7	12.5	277	640
Zinger Crunch Salad	306	0.9	2.2	7.7	169	517
Original Chicken Salad	244	1.5	1.9	6.0	156	381
McDONALD'S						
Big Mac and Medium Fries	326	0.8	4.5	14.3	276	900
Chicken McNuggets (6) and Medium Fries	217	0.7	2.3	12.5	269	584
Crispy Chicken Ranch Salad with Dressing	385	1.2	2.9	7.5	131	504
Chicken Salad and Pasta	326	0.9	1.8	5.0	152	496
Grilled Chicken Caesar Salad with Dressing & Croutons	389	1.0	1.9	3.7	98	381
Grilled Chicken Salad with Balsamic Dressing & Croutons	343	0.9	2.4	4.4	110	377
Garden Side Salad with French Dressing & Croutons	159	0.7	trace	1.1	47	75
PIZZA HUT						
Individual Margherita Pan Pizza and Garlic Bread	382	1.4	7.6	14.6	331	1,264
Salad Bowl	432	0.4	0.6	3.5	73	315

OUR TESTS

We bought the food in July and August 2005 and had it tested by an independent, accredited food laboratory. All food was tested as given to us. McDonald's told us that serving staff made a mistake with our order: the Grilled Chicken Salad with Balsamic Dressing should not be sold with croutons, and a Garden Side Salad should be sold with a balsamic dressing, not French dressing (as we were given). For these two products, the standard options will have a slightly lower fat content than those results shown in the table. McDonald's has told us that since our testing it has changed the formulation of its Crispy Chicken.

For our full test results, go to www.which.co.uk/fast-food-table

McDonald's website, for example, claims that a Big Mac and Medium Fries contains 786 calories, whereas we found 900. Burger King says that its Whopper and Regular Fries contains 13g of saturated fat (we found 19g), while KFC said its Zinger Crunch Salad contains 2.4g of saturated fat (we found 6.7g). KFC said that discrepancies could be due to 'over portioning' at some stores.

A HEALTHY IMAGE?

To spruce up its image, McDonald's isn't just offering healthier menu options. It's also putting more emphasis on health and sport in its ads.

Recent ads for McDonald's featured children playing football or skateboarding and carried tag lines such as 'Run about, keep active'. And they seem to make an impact: pupils we spoke to in our research (see p15) regarded McDonald's as one of the healthiest fast-food brands. 'Some of the foods and drinks there are very healthy. They do milk there and water from the mountains,' said one eight-year-old girl. Another child declared: 'I prefer McDonald's because I like healthy foods.'

Linking less healthy food with sport or sporting heroes is a favourite ploy of the food industry – think of Gary Lineker and Walker's crisps or David Beckham and Pepsi. Along with Coca-Cola, McDonald's now spends millions of dollars as a worldwide sponsor of the Olympics, gaining exclusive marketing rights.

In Atlanta in 1996 McDonald's became the first branded restaurant inside the Olympic village. In 33 days it served up 195,570 Big Macs and double cheeseburgers and 173,000 portions of fries – to athletes. Fine if you're about to run a marathon, but most of us would be shocked to realise you need to walk for several miles to burn off the calories in a single burger (see right for more examples).

Professor Gerard Hastings, who reviewed the effects of food promotion on children for the Food Standards Agency (FSA), told us: 'Much of the research that has been done has focused on TV advertising. But we're living in a very different world, and companies now use many techniques. I predict fast-food companies will become increasingly interested in being associated with sports, to counter-balance the unhealthy image. It's something that needs to be watched carefully.'

FUN, FUN, FUN

One of the other marketing strategies, aimed particularly at younger children, is the emphasis on fun. Over the past year we've monitored promotions on the websites of Burger King, KFC, McDonald's and Pizza Hut. All four companies offer toys or goodie bags with children's meals, but the free toys with Burger King's and McDonald's children's meals change most frequently, ensuring there's always a new range to collect.

Many are firm favourites with very young children (Mr Men, Postman Pat, Winnie the Pooh and My Little Pony), or are linked to big movies for slightly older kids (The Incredibles and Peter Pan). As we went to press, Burger King was offering a Star Wars promotion with 21 toys to collect.

What's in it?

Burger King Fries BK fries are actually only 86 per cent potato. A surprising list of 11 other ingredients includes partially hydrogenated vegetable oil, rice flour, dextrose, corn syrup solids and salt.

McDonald's Chicken Grills They may look like pieces of simple grilled chicken breast, but they contain 19 other ingredients (including flour, starch, oil and lactose). So if you have allergies to gluten, dairy or wheat, they could trigger a reaction.

McDonald's and Burger King Cheddar Cheese Slices These contain 13 ingredients, including 'cheese flavouring', trisodium citrate, diphosphates, polyphosphates and sorbic acid.



Walking it off

The guideline daily number of calories is 2,500 for men and 2,000 for women. But a building worker may need up to 5,000 a day to maintain weight, while a sedentary office worker may need only 1,500. The chart shows how far you would have to walk to burn off the calories in various types of fast food (assuming a walking speed of three miles an hour).

KFC Original Chicken Salad



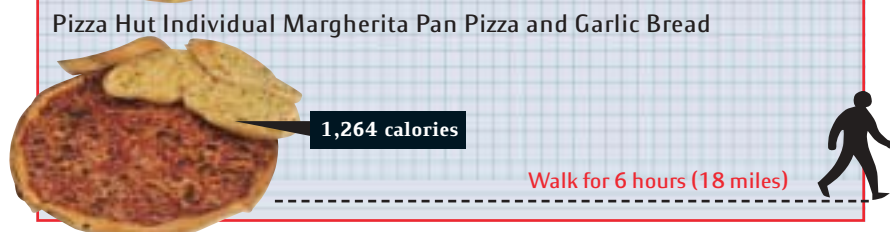
Burger King Chicken BLT Baguette and Large Coke



Big Mac, Medium Fries and Small Vanilla Milkshake



Pizza Hut Individual Margherita Pan Pizza and Garlic Bread



KFC Original Chicken Salad and a Burger King Monterey Melt Baguette

FAT

Saturated and trans fats raise cholesterol and increase the risk of heart disease. The worst item we tested was an Individual Margherita Pan Pizza with Garlic Bread from Pizza Hut, with 29g of saturated fat per portion – 9g of saturated fat more than a woman should eat in a whole day. This Monterey Melt

Baguette from Burger King may sound healthier but contains 33.8g of fat.

We found trans fats in food from all four chains. McDonald's, Burger King and KFC fry some foods in partially hydrogenated vegetable oil, which creates trans fats, but they have improved since our last tests.

SALT

Too much salt increases your risk of high blood pressure, which is linked to heart disease and strokes. Nearly all the fast food we tested contained a lot of salt per portion. And salt can lurk where you least expect it. This KFC Original Chicken Salad contains more salt than the KFC

Chicken Fillet Burger and Fries, while a McDonald's Crispy Chicken Ranch Salad has almost double the salt of a Big Mac and Medium Fries. One Pizza Hut Margherita Pan Pizza and Garlic Bread contains 5.4g of salt – almost all of the FSA's recommended daily maximum of 6g.

Kid's meal: chicken nuggets, fruit bag and milkshake

CHICKEN NUGGETS

Fast-food chicken nuggets contain more meat than supermarket counterparts. Burger King Chicken Strips top the list with 84 per cent meat, while KFC and McDonald's have 76 per cent. In contrast, Tesco's Breaded Chicken Nuggets contain only 50 per cent meat. But there's a price: for £2 you get six fast-food nuggets or 30 frozen supermarket nuggets.

But half the nuggets we tested exceeded the FSA's guideline for a 'lot' of salt (1.25g per 100g). Best was McDonald's – only 0.5g – but KFC's Popcorn Chicken and Burger King's Chicken Strips had the highest salt of all the nuggets we tested.

DRINKS

Think twice before swapping sugary drinks such as cola for a milkshake. McDonald's Small Chocolate Shake contains a hefty 403 calories – as well as more than 20 ingredients, including vegetable fat, glucose and salt. Organic semi-skimmed milk or orange juice are healthier alternatives.

FRUIT AND VEG

The good news is that health-conscious children (or their parents) can swap McDonald's fries for carrot sticks or a fruit bag. Burger King offers similar options. One bag counts as one of the recommended five-a-day portions of fruit or veg. KFC allows kids to swap fries for baked beans or corn on the cob as part of a meal deal.

OUR RESEARCH

In June 2005 specialist market researchers visited eight schools: four in Bristol and four in the North East. We conducted 16 paired interviews with seven-to-eight-year-olds, eight group discussions with 14-to-15-year-olds and in-depth interviews with eight head teachers or an equivalent member of staff. Half of the schools were within easy walking distance of one or more branches of Burger King, KFC, McDonald's or Pizza Hut, and half weren't.

One primary-school head teacher we spoke to told us that the impact of advertising on children is 'absolutely huge. Fast-food outlets are very clever to make sure they latch on to the latest craze, if not create it. I think when you look at what children want, it's the particular toys that come with the happy meal – that's the draw rather than the food.'

All four companies' outlets are popular for children's birthday parties, and McDonald's is the largest provider of children's parties in the UK. The magic and fun doesn't even have to be restricted to a visit to a restaurant – you could pop into Argos or Toys R Us this Christmas and return home with a McDonald's cash register and food kit or a McFlurry maker to put under the Christmas tree.

All of these marketing techniques help reinforce the positive way children view the brand, making it familiar and something they will be drawn to. Our research shows that such advertising is worryingly effective, appearing to prompt many youngsters to pester parents for these foods.

We want the government to restrict the advertising of foods high in fat, sugar and salt during children's viewing times. Ofcom (the broadcasting regulator) is now looking at this issue.

'The fast-food industry knows there is evidence of a health problem it is part of, but it likes to claim it has nothing to do with it'

Professor Tim Lang

We are also part of the Food and Drink Advertising and Promotion Forum set up by the government – the forum includes retailers, manufacturers and advertisers. This will look at tightening restrictions on non-broadcast marketing of food to children, such as internet promotions and packaging. The aim is for these restrictions to be introduced voluntarily from 2006, with the government considering whether legislation is needed in 2007.

PRICE

The affordability of fast food makes it attractive to youngsters. Low prices mean that it's not just a treat but can be bought with lunch or pocket money.

McDonald's 'Poundsaver' and Burger King's '99ers' menus offer selected items, such as burgers, fries and ice creams, for a reduced price of 99p. KFC's main menu also offers several side or snack items for 99p. Amanda Johnson from the British Dietetic Association is concerned that these deals 'lure people into fast-food restaurants, where they might end up spending more on sugary drinks and accompaniments such as fries'.

Then there are the 'meal deals', which are cheaper than buying items separately and can encourage us to eat more than we intended. It's often difficult to work out the cost of individual items, as full price lists can be hidden away, so a meal deal seems an easy choice. For example, a Burger King Whopper on its own costs £2.89 (and contains 614 calories). Adding regular fries and a drink would cost a total of £5.27 if you bought all these items separately. But in a meal deal you'd get them all (and a whopping 1,100 calories) for £4.29. Plus in most chains it's only around 30p extra to 'go large' and opt for a bigger portion of fries and a drink – encouraging us to eat even more.

CONVENIENCE

Children don't just have a limited budget – they also have a limited lunch hour. Our research found that those pupils who lived or went to schools near fast-food outlets ate fast food more often, especially when socialising. One of the primary schools we visited had at least one branch each of Burger King, KFC, McDonald's and Pizza Hut within a one-mile radius. There were 14 other schools within a one-mile radius, too.

Earlier this year, Dr Bryn Austin, from the Harvard School of Public Health, examined the location of fast-food outlets in relation to schools in Chicago. She concluded that, although outlets are located throughout the city, they're clustered in areas within a short walking distance of schools.

Dr Austin told us: 'It can be very hard for children and teens to eat healthily when they're inundated with heavily marketed, easily accessible and inexpensive fast food – almost all of which is high in calories and low in nutritional value. In our study, we focused just on the city of Chicago, but we wouldn't be surprised if studies in other large urban areas in the US or the UK found similar results.'

Burger King says that it 'considers a variety of factors when entering a new market, which we do not disclose publicly'. McDonald's insisted: 'Our core customer group is families, not children/teens, and we certainly do not take into account schools in an area when considering new locations.'

THE COMPANIES RESPOND

We asked the four fast-food giants to respond to criticisms over their role in the obesity crisis. All were quick to point out that it comes down to consumer choice, and that they now offer more variety than before. Pizza Hut told us: 'We have a total product

TOP TIPS

If you're counting calories, and looking for healthier ways to enjoy fast food, consider the following tips.



● Grilled chicken contains less fat and fewer calories than crispy chicken (coated).

● Baguettes are not always a healthy alternative to burgers.



● Choose salads with a low fat dressing and don't add croutons.



● Swap your sugary drink or milkshake for a diet drink, orange juice or milk.

● Consider swapping fries for salad, fruit or veg, or add these to your order for a more balanced meal.



Children's choice

To see how effective fast-food marketing is, we interviewed children aged seven to eight and 14 to 15 about fast food.

Almost all of them loved the taste. 'I like hamburgers because they're hot and they have this nice meat and they put in orange cheese stuff and it makes it taste yummy,' summed up one seven-year-old.

Interestingly, the popularity of the chains seemed to be linked to the size of their advertising budget (see chart, right).

Healthy debate

Younger children knew that parents think fast food is unhealthy, yet

calls it junk food, and when my mum asks me what we want for tea, me and my sister say junk!' said one eight-year-old.

Pizza was thought to be healthier because of the vegetables in the toppings. Chicken was declared healthier than burgers: one group of secondary-school boys observed that girls always choose chicken because 'they think the burgers will make them fat'. (Although a KFC Chicken Fillet Burger and Fries has less saturated fat than a Big Mac and Medium Fries, it still has 29g of total fat and 738 calories a portion.)

Many of the primary schools had some kind

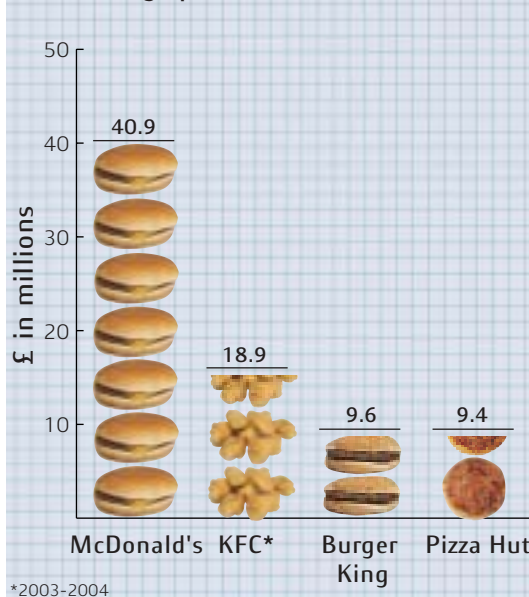
'If they advertise new things on the telly it makes me go'

15-year-old girl

almost all parents used it as a bribe for good behaviour or a treat. Ironically, this led the kids to pester them even more for it. 'When my mum has it, she

of policy on healthy eating, and some had banned fizzy drinks and sweets. In contrast, all the secondary schools offered burgers, chips and nuggets at lunch –

Advertising spend in the UK 2004–2005



McDonald's was the clear favourite with pupils of all ages. Most children knew everything about the promotions, menu, prices and location of all outlets in the area. McDonald's was seen to be the cheapest, most convenient and most fun chain – and one of the healthiest.

KFC scored slightly lower on cost, fun and convenience, while Burger King provoked a mixed response. Pizza Hut was viewed less as a fast-food outlet and more of a family restaurant because it is more expensive and a meal takes longer to eat.

these were always more popular than healthy options. The presence of fast food in school every day makes it seem acceptable outside school, too.

were keen to collect the latest ones.

Convenience and cost

Parents controlled how often younger children ate fast food. Teenagers saw fast-food outlets as a cheap and convenient

place to socialise. New menu items were a big draw. 'If they advertise new things on the telly it makes me go. When they advertise a new McFlurry, I want to go and try it,' said a trend-conscious 15-year-old.

Fast and fun

Fast-food adverts made a big impact on all the children, especially witty ads with catchy jingles on TV. Many kids could sing them word for word.

Younger pupils loved the free toys. Most were aware of how often they changed and



offer that gives our customers the choice of healthy and more indulgent foods that together make up a balanced diet.' McDonald's insists that its customers 'visit us on average two or three times a month, eating around 97 per cent of their meals elsewhere. There's no question that McDonald's food can fit into a balanced diet, and well within the recommended daily calorie intakes for men and women.'

Tim Lang, Professor of Food Policy at City University, was sceptical about this kind of response: 'The food industry knows there is evidence of a health problem which it is part of, but it likes to claim it has nothing to do with it.'

For consumers to make real choices they need to know all the facts. And until fast-food companies make greater improvements to the nutritional content of their core products, and curb promotions aimed at children, they still have a case to answer.

which? says

Fast food is tasty, fun and convenient. But there's a growing problem with obesity, particularly among children, and rising rates of diet-related illnesses. Fast-food companies are not solely responsible, but they have a part to play in helping consumers eat more healthily.

The big four companies must continue to improve the healthiness of their core products, as well as offering healthier alternatives. They must also give us all the facts. We want to see simple and accurate

nutritional information prominently displayed in all outlets at the point of sale, where it is most useful.

Parents might try to guide children towards healthy eating, but their efforts are undermined when fast-food companies use exciting ads, free toys and film tie-ins to market foods high in fat, sugar and salt. We think that this aggressive but sophisticated marketing aimed at children is irresponsible and must be curbed. We also want to see such ads banned when children are watching TV.