



MEDIA RELEASE

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Kids' fast food meals no healthier despite high rates of childhood obesity: new research

New research by Cancer Council NSW has revealed that children's fast food meals sold in NSW have not improved between 2011 and 2016 even though one in four children are overweight or obese.

The study of nearly 300 children's fast food meals, including those from McDonald's, Hungry Jack's, Oporto and KFC found that alarming numbers of kids' meals exceeded kilojoule, saturated fat, salt and sugar recommendations for kids.

Cancer Council NSW's Nutrition Program Manager, Clare Hughes said "We know that the foods kids eat when they're away from home make a significant contribution to their dietary intake."

"Increasing numbers of children are regularly eating fast food, contributing to unhealthy eating habits and weight gain. The habits kids develop when they're young stay with them for life, and once children are overweight, they are more likely to be overweight or obese as adults, putting them at increased risk of 13 different types of cancer later in life."

The study compared the nutrient content of children's fast food meals to recommendations for four-, eight- and 13-year-olds as well as the industry's own criteria for marketing fast food to children. The majority (82%) of meals are not healthy enough to be advertised according to the industry's own nutrient criteria. Yet fast food chains continue to market their children's meals by showing imagery only of the limited, 'healthier' options, despite the majority of kids' meal choices being unhealthy.

"Most meals contained more sodium than an eight-year-old should be eating in one meal; half had too much sugar and saturated fat, and over a third had too many kilojoules." Ms Hughes continued.

This study also looked at kids' meals offered at so-called 'fast casual' restaurants. Fast casual chains often market themselves as 'healthier' alternatives to traditional fast food chains. Though lower in kilojoules, the average children's meals at fast casual chains were found to be higher in saturated fat than their traditional fast food counterparts.

In light of the findings, Cancer Council Australia is calling on the Australian Government to set standards for children's meals to ensure they don't exceed recommendations for sodium, saturated fat, sugar and energy.

Clare Hughes, who is also Chair of Cancer Council Australia's Nutrition and Physical Activity Committee said that further action was required to help parents make healthier choices.



“Current laws only require kilojoule content to be listed on menu boards meaning parents aren’t able to compare the sodium, sugar and saturated fat content of kids’ meals to make healthier choices.

“We have seen very little change in the content of foods since our last study in 2010, and since the introduction of kilojoule labelling in NSW in 2012 which set out to reduce the unhealthy impact of fast food by providing clear information so people can make healthier choices.

“Children’s fast food meals remain high in kilojoules and provide little nutritional benefit. We want governments to ensure that fast food outlets support parents, protect children, and ultimately prevent thousands of future obesity-related cancer cases.” Ms Hughes concluded.

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Notes to Editors

About the study

- An audit of nutrition information for all possible combinations of children’s meals (n=289) was conducted. Nutrient composition of children’s meals at fast food (chains that are signatories to the Quick Service Restaurant Industry (QSRI) Initiative for Marketing to Children - Chicken Treat, Hungry Jack’s, KFC, McDonald’s, Oporto and Red Rooster) and fast casual chains (Grill’d, The Coffee Club, Subway, Guzman Y Gomez, Jamaica Blue and Mad Mex) were conducted. These were compared with children’s daily and meal (30% of daily) recommendations.
- A comparative analysis was conducted to determine if the proportion of meals that exceeded meal requirements and recommendations, and compliance with the food industry’s own (QSRI) criteria, changed between 2010 and 2016.
- The article, *Nutrient composition of Australian fast-food and fast-casual children’s meals available in 2016 and changes in fast-food meals between 2010 and 2016* is published in Public Health Nutrition doi:10.1017/S1368980019001897 available at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980019001897>



Proportion of fast food children’s meals exceeding 30% and 100% of estimated daily requirements (30% of daily intake is the maximum that it is recommended for a meal to contain)

| % meals | Energy | | Saturated fat | | Sugars | | Sodium | | |
|---|----------------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|-------------|
| | Chain type (n) | Fast food (172) | Fast Casual (117) | Fast food | Fast Casual | Fast food | Fast Casual | Fast food | Fast Casual |
| % Meals exceeding 30% of estimated requirements and recommendations | | | | | | | | | |
| 4 year old | | 69 | 60 | 52 | 71 | 67 | 62 | 88 | 90 |
| 8 year old | | 44 | 32 | 38 | 62 | 54 | 50 | 88 | 90 |
| 13 year old | | 12 | 5 | 14 | 32 | 27 | 37 | 64 | 31 |
| % Meals exceeding 100% of estimated requirements and recommendations | | | | | | | | | |
| 4 year old | | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 13 |
| 8 year old | | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 13 |
| 13 year old | | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 |

About Cancer Council:

Cancer Council is Australia’s leading cancer charity working across every aspect of every cancer. Every day, we support families affected by cancer when they need it most, speak out on behalf of the community on cancer issues, empower people to reduce their cancer risk, and find new ways to better detect and treat cancer. With your help, we’re getting closer to a cancer free future every day.