



# Weapons of MASS Consumption

Fast-food establishments are serving up healthy alternatives in addition to their fatty favorites—but are the healthy alternatives really better for you? BY LESLIE J. FARER

When you visit McDonald's, you're faced with a perplexing choice: Do you order a Big Mac®, medium french fries and a Vanilla Triple Thick® shake, or will you opt for the California Cobb Salad with Grilled Chicken and Apple Dippers? What if you go to Wendy's? There, you're faced with a choice of the Mandarin Chicken® Salad and Fresh Fruit Cup, or a Bacon and Cheese Hot-Stuffed Baked Potato and a medium Frosty™.

Over the past few years, healthier additions have been gaining a place on fast-food menus in response to criticism by consumers, public health organizations and the medical community's claim that the fat and calorie-laden foods served by this multi-billion dollar industry contributes to the growing trend of obesity, diabetes and other disorders in the United States.

This controversy was publicized in 2003 when McDonald's was sued for falsely promoting the health benefits of its Big Mac and Chicken McNuggets® and allegedly causing the obesity of two teenagers. Although initially dismissed, the lawsuit was reinstated last January. Additional

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proceedings were brought against the fast-food giant for failing to reduce the use of trans fats in its cooking oil. The release of the 2004 film *Super Size Me*, documenting the deleterious effects on filmmaker Morgan Spurlock's health after dining at McDonald's three times a day for one month, brought more attention to the pitfalls of fast-food.

## Do the Math

Let's take a look at the typical fast-food menu and compare nutritional values against the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005* by the United States Department of Agriculture and Health and Human Services. Based on a 2,000-calorie a day diet, the *2005 Guidelines* recommend a maximum of 65 grams total fat, 20 grams saturated fat and 2,400 milligrams sodium. Previously, a maximum of 40 grams added sugar (not including sugar from fruits) per day was recommended. The guidelines suggest limiting sugar intake further. A popular Burger King meal of a Whopper®, large chocolate shake and medium french fries racks up a whopping 1,910 calories, 87 grams of fat, 35 grams of saturated fat, 2,280 milligrams of sodium and 136 grams of sugar. With this meal, you've reached or surpassed your calorie, fat and sodium limits and have gone more than three times over your recommended sugar intake in just one sitting.

Or how about McDonald's Deluxe Breakfast with scrambled eggs, biscuits, sausage, hash browns, hot cakes, syrup and margarine, which serves up 1,220 calories, 60 grams of total fat, 17 grams of saturated fat, 1,900 milligrams of sodium and 42 grams of sugar? By 9 a.m. you've reached half of your daily calorie allotment and near the maximum limit for fat, sodium and sugar.

## Think Again

Are the new options really a healthy improvement? With the exceptions of freshly prepared fruit salads, orange and apple slices, unadorned spring salads, milk, juice and untopped baked potatoes, further nutritional evaluation reveals many of the new alternatives are also laden with fat, sugar and salt. The California Cobb Salad with Crispy Chicken and ranch dressing at McDonald's has about 700 milligrams more sodium than a Big Mac (about 1,700 milligrams, two thirds of the daily limit) with almost the same fat and calorie content. Topping your salad with low-fat balsamic dressing instead of ranch would cut the calories and fat by about 20 percent, but would increase sodium to almost two grams—just a few sprinkles short of the maximum daily sodium allowance. And take a look at the so-called healthy desserts—the Apple Dippers slices are accompanied by a sugary caramel dip and the Fruit and Walnut Salad is topped with candied walnuts and sweetened yogurt.

Wendy's plain baked potato is a nutritional powerhouse—even with a little butter. But start topping it with bacon and cheese and you add almost a gram of salt and 25 grams of fat. Wendy's Homestyle Chicken Strips Salad with reduced-fat dressing is comparable to a Big Bacon Classic® Hamburger in calories and fat and has even more sodium.

At Burger King, the Tendercrisp™ Caesar Salad with Ken's® Creamy Caesar Dressing has 43 grams of fat (about half of your daily allotment) and 1,770 milligrams of sodium (three quarters of your daily limit). Better choices would be the Fire-Grilled Shrimp Garden Salad with fat-free dressing or the BK Veggie® Burger, but both of these selections contain more than one gram of salt.

The more toppings, dressings and accompaniments, the more calories, fat and salt. And just because an item includes the words "fruit," "natural" or "low-fat" doesn't mean it's free of added sugar or salt—most low-fat or fat-free desserts have added sugar and reduced-fat dressings often have added salt.

## Be an Educated Consumer

Keep in mind that fast-food chains are like any other business—they earn profits by responding to consumer demand. While some positive changes have been made, there is still

## Healthy Additions?

Let's look at recent additions to the menus of three of the largest fast-food chains in the United States—McDonald's, Burger King and Wendy's. While all three chains still offer the standard fare (burgers, fries, shakes and sodas), each has introduced salads and salad entrees served with either low-fat or regular salad dressings.

McDonald's has had some form of salad on the menu since the late 1980s—but with little success. McDonald's upgraded their produce to spring salad mix and grape tomatoes, and introduced the Premium Salads in 2003. These are available in Bacon Ranch, California Cobb and Caesar varieties, served plain or topped with crispy or grilled chicken and Newman's Own® salad dressings. The addition in 2003 of the Apple Dippers fruit selection, pre-packaged apple slices and caramel dip, was followed in 2005 by the Fruit and Walnut Premium Salad, a mix of apples and grapes topped by vanilla yogurt and candied walnuts. And in another attempt to project a sense of commitment to its customers' dietary well-being, McDonald's announced its "Worldwide Nutrition Information Initiative": food packaging will be labeled with nutritional information in an easily understandable icon and bar chart format beginning in 2006.

The Fire-Grilled Caesar and Garden Salads, introduced at Burger King in 2004, may be ordered with grilled chicken or Tendercrisp™ (breaded) chicken. Burger King also markets "low-carbohydrate" selections: the Angus Steak Burger and the Angus Bacon and Cheese Steak Burger, which are served with beef patties sans buns. Burger King is the only chain to offer a veggie burger, prepared with a Morningstar Farms® patty on a sesame seed bun. The only "fruits" offered at Burger King are Mott's® Strawberry Flavored Applesauce and Minute Maid® Apple Juice.

Wendy's offers a larger variety of salads, fruits and other more healthy alternatives, including baked potatoes and yogurt with granola. According to Tom Mueller, president and chief operating officer of Wendy's North America, "We're actively responding to consumers' requests for more varied and nutritious food options." Salads have been offered since 1979 and most recently in the following varieties: Mandarin Chicken Salad, Spring Mix Salad, Chicken BLT Salad, Taco Supreme Salad and Homestyle Chicken Strips Salad. Wendy's has three fruit selections—the Fresh Fruit Bowl, Fresh Fruit Cup and Mandarin Orange Cup. The fruit bowl and cup are prepared fresh (in contrast to McDonald's Apple Dippers, which are pre-packaged), two to three times a day, with pineapple, cantaloupe, honeydew and red grapes. At Wendy's, potatoes may be purchased baked and plain. The consumer may, if desired, add sour cream and chives, broccoli and cheese, or bacon and cheese toppings.

a long way to go to achieve a predominantly wholesome menu—and the motivation for change ultimately rests with the consumer. Responding to the problem of contradictory consumer demand, Mark Lepine, director of food innovation and development at McDonald's, says, "There has to be a willingness on the part of the customer to buy these products. We only sell things people want to buy." For example, results of market research revealed that the Apple Dippers would not sell without the caramel dip—testimony to Americans' affinity for sweets. The Premium Salads actually only brought in 10 percent of sales in 2004—the Double Cheeseburger is still the best seller (1.5 billion sold annually in the United States). When asked if the Fire-Grilled Salads at Burger King rivaled burgers and fries in sales, Joe Gerbino, manager of external communications for Burger King, says though they tested strongly with consumers, "This is still Burger King."

Statistics regarding obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure and other ailments are staring Americans in the face. They can either become educated in nutritious eating, as many have, or continue to line the

pockets of the fast-food industry—and wreck their health—by indulging in the typical fast-food fare. U.S. District Judge Robert Sweet, who threw out the first lawsuit against McDonald's in 2003, wrote, "If a person knows, or should know, that eating copious orders of supersized McDonald's products is unhealthy and may result in weight gain [and other deleterious consequences], it is not the place of the law to protect them from their own excesses."

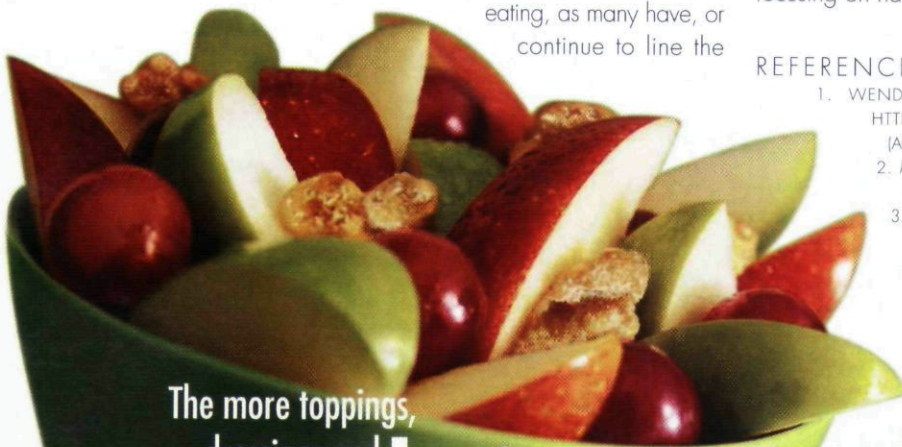
### Smart Selections

So, what meal selection will you choose the next time you find yourself face-to-face with a Burger King or McDonald's menu? The safest bet is to stick with the most unprocessed, low-fat and green items available, while avoiding excess salt and sugar. Or, better yet, stay home and prepare your own wholesome meals. **AF**

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The more toppings,  
dressings and  
accompaniments,  
the more **calories,**  
**fat and salt.**

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