

The Fast Food Diet

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Figure 1: Sizer recommendations for dining out (1)

Abstract

The Fast Food Diet claims that you can lose weight by eating fast food menu items as long as you eat the right amount of calories within a 1,500 calories-a-day range. I hypothesize that this diet is hazardous to one’s health because it is high in sodium and fat, and low in vitamins and minerals. My method was to provide a comparison of the best and worst fast food menu choices one could eat in a day, and analyze their nutritional content. I compared the nutritional data of these choices to the daily requirements needed for each nutrient. I discovered that even the best fast food choices are still high in carbohydrates and fat and low in other essential nutrients such as potassium, iodine, B vitamins, etc. For the best possible diet the calories consumed only satisfy 50% of the daily requirement for women and 38% for men. The worst possible diet the calories consumed constitute 67% of the daily requirement for women and 51% for men. Because the diet contains no fish there are no omega-3 fatty acids to aid in brain function among other things. I discuss the other adverse effects of the Fast Food Diet. As the Fast Food Diet is not a safe choice for losing weight, I have included a page from Sizer’s *Nutrition: Concepts and Controversies* that recommends healthy choices for dining at fast food restaurants.

Introduction

The Fast Food Diet, according to goodhousekeeping.com, claims that you can lose weight by eating fast food menu items as long as you eat the right amount of calories within a 1,500 calories-a-day range. I hypothesized that this diet is likely to be hazardous to one’s health because it is high in sodium and fat and low in vitamins and minerals.

Method

My method was to provide a comparison of the best and worst fast food menu choices one could eat in a day. I then compared the nutritional content of these choices with the recommended daily allowances published by the U.S. government. Price information was obtained at Beloit area restaurants.

Results

I could find no peer-reviewed literature evaluating the Fast Food Diet, but Tables 1 and 2 present results obtained by visiting fast food restaurants and obtaining information that was available there and online. The best possible Fast Food Diet fails when measured by the daily requirements related to calories, total fat, sodium, dietary fiber, vitamins and minerals. It comes closest in meeting the needs of the daily requirement of protein. The low fiber content puts the dieter in danger of constipation and worse, colon cancer. The worst possible diet is still very low in calories, only 330 calories more than the best possible diet. The dietary fiber is 1 g above the daily recommended intake. The fat is under the recommended amount, but the protein is over. And the sodium is 50% over the recommended amount. What both diets lack are essential nutrients. The nutrition data provided at restaurants list vitamins A and C, minerals, calcium, and iron but reveal nothing about potassium, magnesium, the B vitamins, vitamin E, etc. Still with the information provided the percent daily requirements for vitamins A and C and minerals calcium and iron are substantially below the RDAs.

TABLE 1: Best possible diet on a given day

Name	Price	Cal.	Total fat (g)	Sodium (mg)	Total Carb (g)	Dietary Fiber (g)	Total sugars (g)	Protein (g)	Vitamin A*	Vitamin C*	Calcium*	Iron*
Breakfast ; McDonald's Sausage Burrito	\$1.39	300	16	830	26	1	2	12	10	2	15	1
Lunch: Wendy's ultimate chicken grill and side salad	\$5.14	355	7	950	44	4	10	29				
Dinner Dairy Queen Homestyle Burger	\$2.09	350	14	400	33	1	8	17	6	0	4	15
Total	\$8.62	1,005	37	2180	103	6	20	58	16+	2+	16+	16+
% Daily Value	n/a		Female 59% Male 39%	91%	34%	24%	n/a	116%				

TABLE 2: Worst possible diet on a given day

Name	Price	Cal	Total fat (g)	Sodium (mg)	Total Carb (g)	Dietary Fiber (g)	Total sugars (g)	Protein (g)	Vitamin A*	Vitamin C*	Calcium*	Iron*
Breakfast Subway Western Egg Breakfast Sandwich	\$2.94	440	18	1320	45	5	7	25	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Lunch Wendy's Large chilly with cheddar cheese and salines	\$2.09	425	15.5	1375	39	8	10	25	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Dinner Taco Bell Fiesta Taco Salad (beef) w/o the shell	\$4.19	470	24	1510	41	13	9	23	25	20	30	25
Total	\$9.22	1335	57.5	4205	125	26	26	73				
% Daily Value			Female 67% Male 51%	88%	175%	42%	104%	-	50%	n/a		

TABLE 3: Daily Requirements according to USDA

Nutrient	Calories	Total fat (g)	Sodium (mg)	Total Carbohydrates (g)	Dietary Fiber (g)	Total sugars (g)	Protein (g)
Amount	2000 female* 2600 male*	65 g (30% of calories)	2400	300g	25 g	n/a	50g (10% of calories)

TABLE 4: EVALUATION SUMMARY OF THE FAST FOOD DIET

Pros	Cons
Convenient	Does not offer enough vitamins and minerals
Cheap*	Lack of omega-3 fatty acids
Tasty**	Can be low in fiber content
Variety (50+ options from 9 fast food chains)	Does not mention exercise

Discussion

An estimated average of the monthly cost of food on the Fast Food Diet, based on the best and worst possible diets on a given day, would range from \$258.60 to \$276.60 per month. According to the USDA thrifty meal plan, a frugal adult may spend up to \$434.40 on food per month. Thus an individual on the Fast Food Diet would spend less money than on a frugal healthy diet. Does it taste good? Although fast food derives much of its taste from the high amount of fat, sugar and sodium present in the food, the Fast Food Diet does not allow for condiments and certain cheeses as these are usually laden with high-fructose corn syrup and/or fat. Furthermore, I discovered that even the best fast food choices are still high in carbohydrates and fat and low in other essential nutrients. There is no fish in the diet. There are no omega-3 fatty acids needed for brain function. While there is omega-3 fatty acid containing fish available at many fast food restaurants, it is usually deep-fried, consequently containing an excessive amount of calories. In addition several fast food restaurants offer healthier menu items such as vegetarian hamburgers and salads, but make no mention of them. All fast food restaurants have nutrition information available on their respective websites; all restaurants had the nutrition data on a poster that was clearly visible and others had brochures. The diet information does not mention exercise.

Conclusion

My research concludes that the Fast Food Diet is an unhealthy one. However, for healthy options when eating out at a fast food restaurant I would recommend the choices offered by Sizer’s *Nutrition Concepts and Controversies* shown in Fig. 1.

References

1. [Sizer, F. and E. Whitney, Nutrition Concepts and Controversies, 10th ed, Thomson, 2006, Belmont](#)
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