



Help children cut back on calories

Does eating fast food contribute to childhood obesity?

While there are many reasons why there's a growing problem with childhood obesity, researchers recently reported that the amount of food children eat that's prepared outside of home or school could be a significant factor.

In a study in the August 2011 edition of the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, researchers from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, examined data gathered from more than 29,000 children and teens from nationwide surveys in 1977-78, 1989-91, 1994-98, and 2003-06.

The researchers found that the average number of calories children ages 2 through 18 tend to eat increased from 1,842 in 1977-78 to 2,022 in 2003-2006, even though the amount of food prepared and eaten at home decreased slightly. In fact, the amount of food eaten away from home increased over the years by an average of 255 calories a day.

The overall increase in calories consumed by children equals about 180 calories a day. Over a year, that can equate to about an extra 18 pounds around the middle.

What's the answer? A two-pronged approach might work best. First, parents might want to find ways to prepare more meals at home, where they have more control over calories and nutrients. Pre-prepared food, whether it's fast food or prepared items from the deli counter at the grocery or convenience store, tends

to be higher in calories, fat, sugar and sodium than meals prepared at home. A homemade meal with fish or lean meat, vegetables, a salad and some whole-grain bread or pasta can provide more nutrient-bang for the buck than most meals you can purchase outside the home. No time? Find ways to streamline by preparing enough for several meals at once — leftovers can be faster to heat than ordering a meal at a drive-through window.

Second, examine the food your children consume that's not prepared at home. Review nutrition information from the outlets where you frequently go, and ask your children to help — this will help them understand how much of a difference there is among the choices available as you review the information together.

For example, compare the calories and other nutrients in a regular hamburger with those of a cheeseburger or large sandwich. Look at the nutrition information for yogurt, low-fat white milk, salads and fruit cups and compare it to that of french fries, milkshakes and high-sugar soft drinks.

There are options for healthier, lower-calorie meals even at fast-food restaurants — you just have to pay attention and make the best choices for you and your family.

Chow Line is a service of Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Chow Line, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH, 43210-1044, or filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu.



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