**Fast food consumption in US and its incidence and risks in obesity**

The prevalence of obesity in the US continues to increase with each passing year. Over the last decades, statistics point to a worrying trend with regard to the upward progression of obesity, both nationally and globally. Today, obesity is one of the biggest public health concerns. Concurrent with the rise in national obesity levels is a rise in calorie intake. Over the decades, there has been a rapid increase in the quantity, as well as the energy density of foods taken in the US, resulting in a significant spike in the per capita calorie intake throughout the American population (Rydell, Harnack, Oakes, Story, Jeffery & French, 2008). A range of factors, including environmental, socioeconomic, behavioral, and cultural influences impact people’s food choices. Such food choices, in turn, impact the balance of energy in the body. Combined with other factors such as metabolic and genetic factors, food choices influence body weight, as well as composition, sometimes resulting in atypical body weight and composition. The explosion of fast food restaurants in the US since the 1970s produced a trend of eating away from home. Eating out is generally associated with overconsumption, as well as an increased risk of obesity largely owing to the energy-dense, larger portions, and bigger variety of foods served at fast food restaurants. This paper examines the trends of fast food consumption in the US, assessing its benefits and disadvantages, as well as its implications on health and obesity.

**Advantages of fast food**

Consumption of fast food is a trend that continues to expand annually with quick-service restaurants posting sales in the hundreds of millions of dollars every year, as well as opening new outlets at extraordinary speeds. As the modern life becomes more hectic, the consumption of fast food increasingly takes root in the American diet. Fast food presents consumers with a range of benefits that fit into their hectic schedules. These benefits include convenience, speed, and low costs. For the most part, fast food is typically sold at eating establishments renowned for quick availability. The explosion of fast food establishments over the years continues to provide consumers with convenient access to ready food (Bowman & Vinyard, 2004). Today, there several fast food restaurants in most neighborhoods, providing consumers with easy access to ready food that saves them the hustle of having to prepare and make foods on their own. Undoubtedly, this ease of access is a major motivator for consumption of fast food. Since many Americans work several jobs or long hours, they typically frequent fast food for the convenience of getting a quick meal within a short duration and devoid of the pressures of shopping for ingredients, and preparing and cooking the meal.

Furthermore, fast food establishments pride themselves in delivering their menu items with the high turnaround. This is particularly evident among pizza establishments which have a time cap on their delivery time, sometimes allowing consumers to get the meal free of charge in the event of late delivery. The guarantee of speedy delivery of food is a major attraction to fast food for many consumers. Coupled with easy access to fast food establishments, the high speed of food delivery pushes many Americans who are pressed for time owing to their busy schedules to choose fast food over other types of food (Rydell, Harnack, Oakes, Story, Jeffery & French, 2008).

In addition, fast food is significantly cheaper than other forms of food, particularly healthy food such as organic fruits and vegetables. From a calorie point of view, fast food offers significantly lower costs for the same amount of calories compared to alternative and healthy food. Notably, the low cost of fast food relative to healthier food alternatives continues to encourage people to opt for it over the more expensive healthier alternatives. This can explain why a vast majority of lower-income individuals are more inclined to consume fast food, thus are at a greater risk of becoming obese Putnam, Allshouse, Kantor, 2002). Furthermore, the cost of fast food rises at a significantly lower rate compared to the cost of healthier foods. Today, there is an explosion of healthier food alternatives such as organic foods whose costs are significantly high compared to conventional healthy foods, and even more so compared to fast food. In addition, the explosion of fast food establishments throughout the US has resulted in high competition among suppliers of fast food who maintain low prices of their menu items to attract more and more customers (Rydell, Harnack, Oakes, Story, Jeffery & French, 2008). Consumers of fast food are the primary benefactors of the price wars among fast food establishments.

**Disadvantages of fast food**

A major demerit of fast food concerns its minimal health benefits. For the most part, fast food contains significantly less vitamins and minerals such as vitamin C, calcium, vitamin A, vitamin E, zinc, carotene, and magnesium compared to non-fast foods such as fruits and vegetables. Typically, consumption of healthier foods containing high levels of vitamins and minerals makes people consume less food to feel full, resulting in effective weight management. In this regard, consumption of fast food, which contains minimal health benefits further complicates healthy weight management (Bowman & Vinyard, 2004). Another major disadvantage of fast food that relates to weight management is the increasing size of portions of fast food. The growing size of portions of fast food further compounds the issue of the ingredients of the fast food. Arguably, the growing portion sizes of fast food is growing parallel to the average weight of Americans. Compared to portion sizes in the 1970s and 80s, fast food portion sizes today are significantly larger, thereby delivering more quantities of calories, fat, and sugar to the consumer. Accordingly, when presented with bigger portion sizes, the typical person will consume their entire meal irrespective of whether or not they are full (Rydell, Harnack, Oakes, Story, Jeffery & French, 2008). This means that people are consuming higher quantities of fast food in one sitting than they did in previous years, which correlates to higher consumption of unhealthy food that offers little nutritional value.

In addition to providing minimal nutritional value, fast food also poses significant health concerns given that most fast food items go through some degree of processing. Prior to reaching the consumer’s plate, fast food undergoes processing to enhance its flavor, palatability, and texture. Such processing sometimes involves the use of chemicals and additives such as preservatives that may cause deleterious effects, especially when consumed over a long period of time (Ledikwe, Ello-Martin & Rolls, 2005). In essence, with fast food, the consumer has no control over the nutritional quality of the meal’s basic ingredients, as well as the additives added to the dishes. Some of these additives have been associated with higher risks of serious health issues such as cancer.

**Fast food and obesity**

The consumption of fast food directly correlates to adverse dietary issues associated with obesity, particularly higher intake of sugar-sweetened drinks, saturated fat, fat, and calories. The link between fast food and obesity stems from the correlation between fast food and weight gain, higher high body mass index (BMI), and unsuccessful weight-loss maintenance. According to a study conducted by Smith, McNaughton & Gall et al. (2009) enhanced exposure or access to fast food restaurants on a neighborhood level correlated to enhanced obesity and poor diet quality. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2013) notes that between 2007 and 2010, adults in the US consumed at least 11.3 percent of their everyday calories from fast food. The CDC’s study further demonstrates that such consumption of fast food declines significantly with age with adolescents and young adults accounting for the largest share of consumers of fast food. In addition, the CDC also found that the degree of total daily calories consumed from fast food also increased as individuals’ weight statuses increased, pointing to a correlation between consumption of fast food and poor weight management.

Presently, at least one-third of the American population is obese with frequent consumption of fast food being a significant contributor to weight gain. Fast food contributes to the incidence of obesity as it encompasses unhealthy ingredients that contain more sugar, carbohydrates, and fats and minimal vitamins and minerals (Ledikwe, Ello-Martin & Rolls, 2005). There is a range of fast food, including burgers, pizza, tacos, and chicken. Different fast food restaurants make their fast food in different ways; however, the underlying content of fast food is typically the same as ingredients generally contain a total fat, saturated fat, energy, added sugar, and carbohydrates than healthier foods of the same quantity. Consequently, the consumption of these less healthy ingredients directly correlates to exceeding the daily recommended levels of sugar and fat, resulting in weight gain that, if unchecked can escalate to obesity. Additionally, the vast majority of fast food menu items consist of high quantities of sugar, typically as high fructose corn syrup (Putnam, Allshouse, Kantor, 2002). There is growing evidence that sugar is one of the most notorious causes of the obesity epidemic, as well as health problems associated with obesity, for instance, increased risk of type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases.

**Conclusion**

In the modern fast-paced world, minimal time is dedicated to meal preparation. Fast food establishments offer a great solution to this problem by providing the convenience of access and speedy delivery of low-cost food. As a consequence, the consumption of fast food such as pizza, burgers, and tacos continues to increase steadily. Fast food presents an easy and quick substitute to home-prepared meals given that it is sold partly or completely cooked and ready for consumption within a short amount of time (Rydell, Harnack, Oakes, Story, Jeffery & French, 2008). However, despite the convenience offered by fast food, this group of foods also encompasses deleterious elements such as providing limited nutritional value, as well as posing a serious risk for serious illnesses such as cancer. In addition, there is growing evidence concerning the link between obesity and fast food. The inclusion of high levels of sugar, fat, and calories in fast food provides consumers with a high-calorie meal with little, if any, nutritional value. In the end, it is evident that fast food is a gateway to obesity. The growing pandemic of obesity in the US points to a need to further examine the quality and quantity of food consumed by Americans.

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