

Fast Food: Clogging the World's Arteries

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The average American eats three hamburgers and four orders of French fries per week (Aicardi). Like most Americans, my mouth waters every time I think about a Big Mac and a large order of fries. After almost every Little League baseball game, my mom indulged me in a visit to McDonald's, my favorite restaurant at the time. My addiction to fast food quickly consumed my life as my best friend and I visited the local McDonald's, Wendy's, and Domino's at least two or three times a week. This story may seem absurd, but it should not surprise the average American.

According to Morgan Spurlock's documentary *Super Size Me*, one in every four Americans visits a fast food restaurant each day. America is considered the fattest nation in the world as 60 percent - or 100 billion Americans - are either overweight or obese. With the amount of obese people regularly eating unhealthy fast food meals, it is clear that fast food is linked to obesity. Fast-food companies, such as McDonald's, contribute to the global trend of obesity since they serve unhealthy food and lure customers through effective, yet deceitful, advertising.

Almost all fast-food chains contribute to the obesity epidemic. Even though McDonald's refuses to admit that fast food is directly linked to obesity, it does acknowledge that "any processing our foods undergo make them more dangerous than unprocessed foods" (Spurlock). According to the National Institutes of Health (2004), the large amounts of fat, sugar, salt, and artificial additives in processed food can have negative effects on long-term health. People who regularly consume fast food overload their bodies with unhealthy additives since a single meal from a fast food restaurant often contains enough calories to satisfy one person's daily caloric requirement. A study from the Academy of Pediatrics (2007) also shows that people tend to

consume less milk, fiber, fruit, and non-starchy vegetables after eating fast food. Due to the high consumption of fats and salts, in combination with a low intake of fiber and vitamins, people are more likely to gain weight and damage their health by eating fast food on a regular basis.

Despite the health risks, most fast-food companies refuse to reduce the amount of fattening ingredients in their products. Burger King, Britain's second largest fast-food chain, recently rejected the government's suggestion to reduce levels of salt, fat, and sugar in their recipes. Instead, it will concentrate on making its meals "tastier," regardless of the negative health effects (Leake). Like Burger King, Kentucky Fried Chicken promises to maintain its "unique taste and flavor" by using their unnatural frying oil, which is high in trans fat. A regular intake of KFC products can have harmful effects on long-term health since trans fat is a harder fat that clogs the arteries more than other fats. Michael Jacobsen, the executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, claims KFC knows that other, healthier cooking products are available to produce the same taste: "KFC knows this, yet it recklessly puts its customers at risk of a Kentucky Fried Coronary" ("KFC Blasted"). As long as fast-food chains such as McDonald's, Burger King, and Kentucky Fried Chicken refuse to provide healthier meals, consumers will continue to have unbalanced diets.

According to the National Institutes of Health, the unbalanced diet resulting from the consumption of fast food increases the chances of fatal health conditions, such as hypertension, coronary heart disease, diabetes, stroke, and colon cancer. The NIH further states that those who eat fast food more than twice a week have a two-fold increase in insulin resistance. For people with high resistance, insulin does not process effectively, causing abnormal amounts of sugar to circulate in the blood stream. As a result, high blood sugar levels increase the chances of heart disease and diabetes. Between 1972 and 1995, the amount of Americans diagnosed with diabetes

doubled, along with the number of fast-food restaurants. If this rate continues over the next 25 years, one in ten Americans will be diagnosed with Type II Diabetes (“Diabetes Improvement”).

Even though fast food and obesity have increased dramatically over the years, many people question if fast-food companies are to blame for this national epidemic. Shouldn't consumers themselves be held responsible for their diet choices since they are educated enough to make their own decisions? In reality, however, McDonald's and other fast-food chains' marketing strategies specifically target children for the very reason that most are unaware of the unhealthy ingredients in fast food. According to Spurlock's movie *Super Size Me*, fast-food companies target children by spending significantly more money on advertising than the FDA and other health groups. McDonald's spends \$1.4 billion a year on advertising, while the FDA spends only \$2 million to educate consumers on the damaging health effects of fast food. As a result, children see 10,000 fast food advertisements per year. The European Congress and other governments recognize this problem, but they are unwilling or unable to spend more money in their advertising budgets to educate consumers about the health risks in fast food (“Europe's Children Getting Fatter”). Therefore, obesity will continue to increase worldwide unless governments adjust their budgets to educate children and adults.

In addition to attracting children through advertising, fast-food companies specifically target young children by promoting their jungle gyms and Happy Meal toys. More importantly, fast-food companies target children by portraying childhood figures, such as Ronald McDonald and Wendy, as fun-loving, care-free characters who love to eat fast food and play with children. Along with McDonald's and Wendy's, Burger King and other fast-food chains lure children through advertisements that depict Disney and television characters, such as Shrek and Dora the Explorer, eating their food. With effective advertising that constantly lures young children, fast

food companies further propel the obesity epidemic by addicting children to other products outside of fast food.

In addition to targeting children through advertising, fast-food chains contribute to the obesity problem by targeting specific socioeconomic and demographic households. For example, fast-food companies target children of higher socioeconomic status by selling their foods in public schools and hospitals. According to a 1994 nationwide government study, the highest levels of fast-food consumption were found in youngsters with higher household income levels (“Fast Food Linked to Child Obesity”). In a survey of twenty-three middle schools in San Diego, school-prepared fast foods exceeded 15,000 selling items per week. That is equivalent to a weekly average of 650 fast food items per school (“Fast Food and Obesity”). With the large amount of money available in high socioeconomic households, kids are likely to abandon their peanut butter sandwiches and fruit yogurts for a cheeseburger. By following this unhealthy routine, children gain weight and damage their health since school food service meals tend to have more saturated fat, calories, cholesterol, and sodium than meals prepared at home.

Along with targeting higher socioeconomic households, fast-food chains increase profits by targeting lower-income, urban households. In the same 1994 government survey, the highest levels of fast-food consumption were found in the South by African Americans, while the lowest levels were found in rural areas by Hispanics in the West (“Fast Food Linked to Child Obesity”). Even though fast-food companies attract higher-income households, they also target poor urban households since poor communities lack the necessary nutritional education many Americans receive (“Fast Food and Obesity”). In *Super Size Me*, Spurlock states that one in every four McDonald's he visited in New York City provided brochures describing their nutrition facts. In response to this statistic, McDonald's claimed that every customer can read the nutritional facts

online. However, many impoverished customers do not have this luxury since more than half of them lack a computer or Internet access. Fast-food companies capitalize on these circumstances and contribute to the obesity epidemic by selling their food in these concentrated areas.

Despite the recent *Super Size Me* controversy linking fast food and obesity, many fast-food chains continue to manipulate customers by presenting a seemingly healthier image. In response to Spurlock's film, McDonald's and other companies banned all super sized meals and added healthier options to their menus. After the movie described the unhealthiness of French fries, Wendy's added other seemingly healthy options, such as a baked potato and salad, to substitute for fries. These options seem healthier, but they are in fact harmful to health. For example, on the new McDonald's menu, a Caesar salad with chicken contains 18.4 grams of fat compared to 11.5 grams of fat in a standard cheeseburger. To put this into perspective, a new premium salad with Caesar dressing is equivalent to 79 percent of the average American's daily fat intake (Spurlock). In addition to providing seemingly healthier foods, McDonald's claims it is moving in a healthier direction by placing nutritional information on the "packaging" of most menu items (Simon). Even though this move seems to educate customers about the risks of eating fast food, it does not necessarily affect the initial purchase of the product.

Despite the fact that food chains offer unhealthy food and capitalize on their customers' limited access to health education, it is justifiable for them to defend their actions and cite personal responsibility over corporate responsibility. In 2004, the Senate passed the Personal Responsibility in Food Consumption Act, also known as the Cheeseburger Bill, which prevents the public from suing against "the manufacturers, distributors or sellers of food or nonalcoholic beverage products" for contributing to obesity in America ("House Passes Cheeseburger Bill"). Fast-food companies are not doing anything illegal, but questions still remain: Why does fast

food have to be so unhealthy? Why can't fast-food companies properly inform their customers about their food? Why do they have to deceive children and capitalize on their lack of nutritional knowledge? Regardless of whether fast food is a business or not, the fact is, obesity is a national epidemic in our society. According to Spurlock, fast food will surpass smoking as the leading cause of preventable death in America if left unabated. Even though *Super Size Me* is unrealistic since few people eat fast food exclusively for thirty straight days, it should raise some major concerns. For me, I am now self-conscious of my own diet. If I continue at my current pace of eating fast food at least three times a week, I could be at risk of heart disease by age forty. Ultimately, the decision comes down to the consumer. I've made my decision, what is yours?

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