

Steady diet of fast food could hurt kids academically

By: Kathleen Troher



Are daily trips to Burger King, McDonald's and Taco Bell preventing your child from becoming an academic all-star?

Researchers have uncovered evidence suggesting there may be a link between daily consumption of fast food and a drop in test scores. Their findings underscore recommendations from health experts who advise parents to skip the drive thru more often in 2015 and focus instead on meal preparation at home.

"I always recommend that my patients prepare meals in advance to avoid taking the easy route and stopping at fast food restaurants," says Jamie Portnoy, a registered dietitian and licensed dietitian/nutritionist with Advocate Medical Group-Weight Management Program, which serves Advocate Condell Medical Center in Libertyville, Ill.

"I recommend taking one day out of the week to make a few meals, and placing portions either in the freezer or refrigerator so you can pull them out to reheat for dinner. Even though fast food chains offer some healthy alternatives, we tend to pick the unhealthy options, so it's best to avoid the drive thru altogether and prepare your own meals."

For their study, published online this month in *Clinical Pediatrics*,

researchers reviewed questionnaires and test scores of more than 8,500 students. They found fast food consumption during fifth grade predicted lower levels of academic achievement in reading, math and science in eighth grade. This was the case even when variables such as socioeconomic indicators, physical activity and TV watching were taken into account.

In reviewing the questionnaires, the researchers found 29 percent of the children reported eating no fast food during the week before they took the survey; about 51 percent reported eating fast food one to three times per week; 10 percent reported eating fast food four to six times per week; and 10 percent reported eating fast food daily.

The authors of the study wrote that children who reported eating fast food every day experienced the slowest growth in their academic achievement across all three subjects.

“Substantial research suggests that diets high in fat and added sugar – similar to fast food meals – influence learning processes such as attention,” they wrote.

According to nutrition facts from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, healthy eating in childhood and adolescence is important for proper growth and development and can prevent health problems such as obesity, tooth decay, iron deficiency and osteoporosis. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend a diet rich in fruits and vegetables, whole grains and fat-free and low-fat dairy products for everyone 2 and older. The guidelines also recommend that children, adolescents and adults limit intake of solid fats, cholesterol, sodium, added sugars and refined grains.

Portnoy offers these tips to parents who want to prepare healthier meals for their children:

- When preparing a meal, always start with the vegetable first, then add on from there.
- Avoid last-minute rushing by preparing all or part of your meal the night before, if possible.
- Remember that small portions go a long way.

- Allow kids to help in the kitchen; hands-on will allow your children to get involved in trying new foods.
- Use cookie cutters to make fun shapes with sandwiches.
- Be a good role model by trying new foods yourself.
- Don't be discouraged if your child doesn't like a new food. It may take up to a dozen tries for a child to accept a new food.

Portnoy also suggests these easy meal ideas:

- Tuna salad, soup and wheat crackers, sliced tomatoes, carrot sticks, pineapple and kiwi slices, skim milk
- Sliced turkey sandwich on whole wheat bread with lettuce, cucumber and tomato, carrot sticks, chilled orange and banana slices, low-fat pudding
- Grilled cheese sandwich, tossed salad with low-fat dressing, fresh orange and kiwi slices, vegetable juice
- Tuna packed in water, pita bread, rye crisp, lettuce, celery, radishes, green peppers, cucumbers, zucchini, orange wedges, low-fat pudding
- Low-fat cottage cheese and low-fat shredded mozzarella cheese on medium-sized baked potato, tossed salad with green peppers and shredded carrots, bread sticks, fresh pineapple chunks
- Spaghetti with meat sauce, Parmesan cheese, tossed salad with low-fat dressing and low-fat cheese, garlic bread, steamed zucchini, grapefruit sections
- Sliced roast beef on bun with mustard, lettuce and tomato, oven-baked fries, cauliflower and broccoli, fresh strawberries, low-fat ice cream
- Baked chicken breast, medium-sized baked potato, green beans, sliced tomatoes, grapes and skim milk
- Lean turkey on whole wheat bread with lettuce and tomato, Brussels sprouts, summer squash, animal crackers, apples, skim milk