



Like it or not, fast food is a part of our culture. But should we be eating it?

# IS FAST FOOD BAD?

**A** lot of men, especially fit guys, have a strange love-hate relationship with fast food outlets. They hate the idea of a giant faceless corporation; of the nutritionally irresponsible meals; of its have-a-nice-day-do-you-want-fries-with-that Americanism. But they love the taste of the burgers; the speed of the service; the convenience; the price.

"Fast food strongly appeals to guys, particularly those who are working out," says dietitian Hope Warshaw, author of the books *What to Eat When You're Eating Out* and *Eat Out, Eat Right*. "It's the easy choice. You're burning a lot of calories, you're hungry, you want something fast, you don't want to cook and there it is."

But is fast food that much of a bad thing? Is it okay to have occasionally? And as a nation, is it making us fatter? The thing is, between reams of super-sized bad press and Australia's burgeoning love of fitness, the traditional fast-food restaurants have wised up over the last decade. Alongside triple-bacon cheese burgers and monster fries, the nation's fast food chains began offering healthier options, such as salads, wraps, pasta, lean-beef burgers and even fruit.

Salads landed on the fast-food menus about eight years ago and now just about every fast-food restaurant offers some type of salad. But are these "healthier" menu items really better for you? And more importantly, are we even buying them?



The answer to both questions: not so much. Despite health warnings, Australians are still eating fast food more than ever. According to one study, 30 percent of the money we spend on food every year is spent in the food service industry and 40 percent of that is on fast food.

"In 2007 an average of 1.2 million Australians a day walked through the golden arches, but only 15 percent of sales were its healthy eating options such as salads and fruit juices," according to an article published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* last year. If we follow US trends, then the stats from across the Pacific are even more disturbing. According to the NPD Group, a research company that tracks the food industry in America, a whopping 77 percent of all meals bought in the US are purchased at what's called a "quick-service restaurant." The driving force behind our eating habits is time and money," says NPD

Vice President Harry Balzer. "That's what fast food offers: high speed and low cost."

But is this really such an issue for Australia? Well, yes. Last year according to a home-grown study by Melbourne's Baker IDI Heart and Diabetes Institute, some four million Australians—or 26 percent of the population—are considered obese. Estimates say the obesity epidemic will cost us an extra 3 billion dollars between now and 2028. While we can't place all the blame for our health problems on the fast-food industry, given that we consume so much of the stuff and it's so energy dense, there is little doubt that fast food must be a big factor in our national obesity problem and associated health problems like diabetes.

But now there are healthier choices. Isn't that a better thing? Surprisingly, this isn't the first time fast-food chains have jumped on the healthy bandwagon. An American chain

called Wendy's was the first to offer salad bars and a grilled chicken sandwich 20 years ago. Other chains quickly followed and threw a few healthy offerings on their own menus. In 1991, McDonald's tested the waters with a burger called the McLean; and Taco Bell, which was in Australia, but failed and pulled out, introduced its Border Lights lower-fat line. Both flopped, and ultimately disappeared with a whimper.

Just don't credit this desire to become healthy to some form of latent altruism. "The fast-food industry is responding to negative press and consumer and government pressure," says Warshaw. "These chains are run by business people, not do-gooders. They didn't want to make these healthier changes; they had to. It was face-saving." But now that fast-food restaurants have brought on the salad, are we eating it? Unfortunately, not as much as we should be. The top selling item in Maccas in Australia in 2007 was the cheeseburger. Spokesperson for the Australian Dietitians Association, Susie Burrell, says, "At the end of the day, McDonald's is a fast-food restaurant... people go to a burger joint to eat a burger, not a salad roll. That is why the best outcome is for fast-food restaurants to make their baseline menu healthier."

Healthy items are definitely not driving the gains in fast-food sales. Lisa R. Young, Ph.D, a nutrition consultant and New York University adjunct professor, says, "When people go to a fast-food restaurant, they want to eat junk. "Those who are into healthy food aren't saying, 'Hey, let's go to McDonald's and have a salad.'"

That said, fast-food franchises haven't raked in billions by ignoring statistics and turning their backs on consumer demand. Their goal is to get bodies (of all sizes) in the door by offering something for everyone. In general, Australians like fast, cheap and hearty, and now some of us also want something healthy. "Fast-food chains deserve credit for their healthy choices," says dietitian Jayne Hurley, senior nutritionist at the Center for Science in the Public Interest in the US. "However, at the same time the companies upgraded their salads, the burgers got bigger. Take the notorious Quad Burger, for example. Who needs four big patties of meat with several slices of cheese, drenched in some kind of mystery sauce? The chains are trying to cover all the bases."

Can you have a nutritious meal in a fast-food restaurant? Experts say yes. "It makes no sense to tell people not to eat fast food," says Warshaw. "This is people's reality. And fast food has its virtues. The chains offer a variety of different-size portions. In many cases it's not what you eat, but how much you eat."

Ah, portion size—that old chestnut. According

## BEST & WORST



### SAY NO TO: Double Quarter Pounder

Per Serve  
 •Energy: 3650kJ (852 Calories)  
 •Protein: 56.7g  
 •Fat Total: 52.2g  
 •Fat Saturated: 25.1g  
 •Sodium: 1680mg

### ORDER THIS INSTEAD: Lean Beef Burger

Per Serve  
 •Energy: 1050kJ (252 Calories)  
 •Protein: 17.4g  
 •Fat Total: 8.1g  
 •Fat Saturated: 4.3g  
 •Sodium: 676mg



### SAY NO TO: Double Whopper with Cheese

Per Serve  
 •Energy: 4228kJ (1006 Calories)  
 •Protein: 54.9g  
 •Fat Total 66.1g  
 •Fat Saturated: 24.8g  
 •Sodium: 1558mg

### ORDER THIS INSTEAD: Hamburger

Per Serve  
 •Energy: 1424kJ (330 Calories)  
 •Protein: 19.5g  
 •Fat Total: 15.9g  
 •Fat Saturated: 6.2g  
 •Sodium: 585mg



to Young, there's no more important factor in eating fast and staying healthy. Take Hungry Jacks. The Quad Stack Burger weighs in at 4250 kilojoules compared to 1424 for a hamburger. An order of large Hungry Jack's French fries has nearly twice as many kilojoules (1946) than an order of small fries (1021). "While you have the choice between small, medium and large, it's simple—think small," she says. "Small portions are relatively big, so even if you choose the smaller size, you still get plenty of food."

With the healthy trend firmly in place—for now—take advantage of it.

"There are things that are reasonable like a lean burger," says Hurley. McDonald's lean burger has only 1050kJ (252 calories) and 8 grams of fat, plus it costs only a few bucks." How about those salads? Hope you're sitting down: They aren't always the healthiest choice. Hungry Jacks's Chicken Caesar salad carries a whopping 27g of fat with 1771 kJ (421 calories) and over 1600mg of sodium, clocking in above their Whopper Junior hamburger in terms of fat, sodium and energy. "Salads are only a healthy option as long as you look at what you're putting on top of them and you're dressing them with," says Warshaw.

And whatever you do, be careful not to go overboard. Studies show that, in general, when people eat out they consume more fat, salt and calories than at home. "When you go out, it feels like a splurge," says Hurley. "If you eat fast food once in a blue moon, it doesn't matter what you order. But if you're eating every meal there, that's not a splurge. That's a steady diet of foods high in calories, saturated fat and sodium."

It's also important to remember that not all fast food is created equal. The NPD's Balzer says he's keeping his eye on the growing number of fast casual restaurants like Sumo Salad and Subway that offer higher-priced but also better-quality food. "Fast casual dining accounts for about half of the share of the growth in the fast-food industry," says Balzer. "These restaurants offer fresher ingredients and overall healthier food."

Finally, remember that all the exercise in the world won't protect you from fast food or counteract an unhealthy diet. If you're looking great and keeping active, that's half the equation. It takes a good diet to make your body both strong and healthy. And that, as you know, doesn't come fast.