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HealthlineNews

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How Much Fast Food Do Children Eat and Does it Really Matter?

Written by Chuck Green | Published on September 16, 2015



New report details what percentage of fast food calories children consume, but two experts say there are factors other than diet that lead to obesity.



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Is it OK for kids to gorge on a McDonald's burger and fries?

Well, not really.

But there may be more to overweight children than what they're eating.

At least that's what two experts told Healthline after reviewing a new study released today on how much fast food children consume.

Dr. Fatima Cody Stanford, M.P.H., M.P.A., said one finding that she was struck by in the study was that there was no difference in weight status in children ages 2 to 11 years old and adolescents 12 to 19 years of age — regardless of the

percentage of calories consumed from fast food.

"When you look at the percentage of calories consumed and whether it made a difference in weight status, [none was] noticed among any of the age groups," said Stanford, a specialist in obesity, medicine, and nutrition at Massachusetts General Hospital/Harvard Medical School.



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What Children Are Eating

In 2011–2012, 34 percent of all children and adolescents aged 2–19 consumed fast food on a given day, according to the [National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey](#) released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Almost 12 percent obtained fewer than 25 percent of their daily calories from fast food. Another 12 percent obtained more than 40 percent of their daily calories from fast food.

Calorie intake from fast food was twice as high in adolescents aged 12–19 years than in children aged 2–11 years.

There was no significant difference in fast-food calories between boys and girls.

There was also no significant difference among ethnic groups except for Asian-Americans. They consumed far less fast food than others.

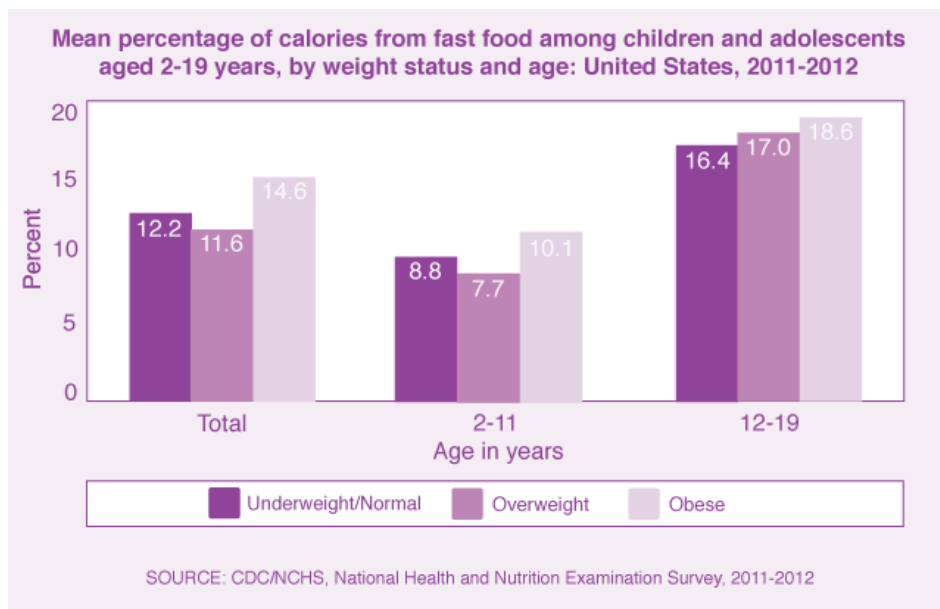
There was surprisingly little difference in the percentage of fast-food calories among various income levels. In other words, poverty wasn't a factor in this particular study.

And there wasn't a large difference between how much children weighed and how much fast food they ate.

The study showed children who are underweight or at normal weight consumed about the same percentage of fast-food calories as children who are overweight.

Children who are obese consumed only a slightly higher percentage of calories.

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Looking at More Than Food

Stanford says the results, especially the lack of differences in some categories, may show that what's on your plate isn't the only thing to worry about.

"When looking at issues like obesity, I think we assume it's all about fast food consumption," Stanford told Healthline. "But obesity's a complex disease and quality of food is only one factor."

Others, such as lack of physical activity and genetics, also compound the likelihood of someone having obesity, she explained.

Meanwhile, the public — and even healthcare providers — have been slow to catch on to that, noted Stanford.

"People should not focus all of their attention on food consumption and assume it's going to give us the answer to treating obesity in the U.S.," she said.

Instead, it's essential to approach the matter more expansively, she remarked.

"I think the practices of Asian children follow the practices of their parents.

They're less likely to be indoctrinated into many of the popular [habits] here, like eating fast food," said Stanford. "I'm glad [the authors of the study] took the time to look at it."

Typically, said Stanford, studies of this type primarily compare non-Hispanic whites, non-Hispanic blacks, and Latino populations.

“ People should not focus all of their attention on food consumption and assume it's going to give us the answer to treating obesity. **”**

Dr. Fatima Cody Stanford,
Massachusetts General Hospital

"I think the fact they took time to kind of tease out the Asian population is important," she said.

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Poverty Factor a Surprise

Whatever the case, Dana Hunnes was surprised the study found poverty doesn't seem to be as big a factor as previously thought.

"With my background in public health, you hear a lot about socioeconomic status and food environments where people live," Hunnes, senior dietitian at Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center, told Healthline. "In general, poorer areas tend to be more in food deserts, where it's difficult to find healthy food."

In any event, are some fast-food outlets' "healthier" menus a factor in this study's findings?

It's hard to say, noted Stanford.

"When you look at fast-food outlets in general, the food quality is lower than what most persons would get from food prepared in their home environment. Certain fast-food outlets [promote themselves] as being healthier," she said. "However, I want to say that, overall, there's been a gradual shift among fast-food restaurants. They're offering healthier choices."

“ We can hope that if fast food becomes healthier, it will help everyone with conditions that come with obesity, like diabetes. **”**

Dana Hunnes, Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center

"If there's a push for healthy foods in the fast-food realm," added Hunnes, "I think that will have an impact on what people are ordering and eating at fast-food restaurants. We can hope that if fast food becomes healthier, it will help everyone with conditions that come with obesity, like diabetes."



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