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Choosing healthy options for kids
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Canwest News Service

Moderation is key for parents who like to visit restaurants with their youngsters, but worry about children's menus that offer little beyond hamburgers, hot dogs, grilled cheese sandwiches and chicken strips, nutritionists say.

For those who eat out once or twice a month and otherwise serve their children healthy food, the excessive amounts of sodium, fat and sugar found in most meals on kids' menus are nothing to worry about. But parents who dine out a couple of times a week or more need to take a hard look at what they're feeding their children and what messages they're delivering about nutrition, experts say.

"When you're eating out three or four times a week, that's a problem," said Ali Chernoff, a registered dietitian and nutrition consultant. "These foods are absolutely not nutritious."

Arleen Cristall, a nutritionist at BC Children's Hospital, agreed, saying parents who eat out often "had better take a good look at the sodium, the fat and the sugar content because the kids we see [who eat a lot of unhealthy foods], their blood work is a disaster.

"They couldn't possibly exercise enough to ever burn anything off."

Cristall, who is coordinator of the hospital's Shapedown BC program for the treatment of childhood and adolescent obesity, said sodium levels alone are one reason to be concerned about the food offered on children's menus and the health of those who eat it regularly.

The daily sodium intake that's considered adequate for children ranges from 1,000 milligrams for one- to three-year-old children to 1,500 mg for those nine to 18 years old. That's about one teaspoon of salt, but the sodium contained in a single restaurant meal for kids is often far higher.

Consider, for example, the kids' cheeseburger meal at Harvey's with its 1,860 mg of sodium, the grilled cheese and fries at Dairy Queen with 1,440 mg or Red's pizzeria pizza at Red Robin with 1,500 mg.

"It's beyond high," Chernoff said. "It's higher than even what an adult should get in a day."

The fat is equally concerning, with Harvey's cheeseburger offering up 32 grams, Red Robin's pizza, 26 g, and the DQ grilled-cheese combo, 21 g. The Keg has a kids' half-rack of barbecue pork ribs with 53 grams of fat – almost the maximum that an adult should consume in a day.

Some kids' meals also contain the dreaded trans fats, which are not recommended in any quantity and are associated with increased risks of heart disease, strokes and Type 2 diabetes.

Information in The Sun database shows one gram of trans fat in the Harvey's kids' cheeseburger meal, McDonald's Happy Meal and three kids' selections at Kelsey's – the mini cheeseburger, the penne cheese alfredo and the penne butter style.

"None of these are great on any level," Cristall said.

But that doesn't mean restaurants and kids' meals should be avoided. "The answer from nutritionists is moderation, and moderation, for me, is once – maybe twice – a month," Cristall added.

Unfortunately, moderation in a busy world is not easily embraced, so nutritionists also have tips for families who eat in restaurants more often than once or twice a month. The first one is to avoid the kids' menu altogether. Look for healthier options on the adult menu and ask for half portions or share a meal with your child.

Another option is to choose healthier items from the appetizer section of the adult menu.

"I would also suggest that parents write their concerns on the [restaurant's] comment cards," Chernoff said. "Comments ... from customers will likely pressure the restaurant to develop a new kid menu or at least have a few healthy options added."

Gloria Tsang is a dietitian who founded HealthCastle.com, an online nutrition community that tries to help people manage their health through better eating. She's also the mother of a four-year-old girl and knows how difficult it can be to steer children towards healthy meals in restaurants and away from the kids' menus and the crayons, colouring books and toys that often accompany them.

"I've seen a lot of negotiations with the kids," she said. "Parents know what's healthy, but they don't want to order something the kids won't eat."

Tsang recommends setting ground rules before entering the restaurant. She allows her daughter to choose the main course, but she selects the side dishes and the drink, usually asking for steamed vegetables instead of fries and milk instead of pop.

"I've learned to always ask," she said. "You'll be amazed at what you can get."

Once in awhile, she will permit a scoop of ice cream so her daughter still feels like she's having a treat.

Tsang deplores chicken nuggets, which she said contain little real chicken, and encourages her daughter to choose grilled chicken sandwiches instead, or a pasta with a red sauce rather than white because the latter is mostly butter and cream.

Salads are not always a healthy option, especially when they consist mainly of lettuce drenched in a high-fat dressing. The low-fat dressing is no better because of the chemical content, Tsang said.

Cristall backs that assessment of salads, saying a side salad with Caesar dressing is no better than eating a Big Mac.

Many of the kids' meals in The Sun's database also show high calorie counts, with Harvey's cheeseburger meal topping the lot at 890 calories, which is almost half what's recommended for an average pre-teen for a day. Triple O's kids' burger with the works and the kids' chicken fingers at Romano's Macaroni Grill are not far behind.

But not all meals on the kids' menus studied by The Sun are bad.

The Keg offers a kids' veggie platter with only 14 grams of fat and 351 mg of sodium, the Olive Garden has spaghetti with tomato sauce that has three grams of fat and 370 mg of sodium, the Wrap Zone has a kids' teriyaki with seven grams of fat and 363 mg of sodium and Taco Del Mar has a kids' quesadilla with 14 grams of fat and 320 mg of sodium.

The calories in those cases range from 194 for the veggie platter to 363 for the wrap. But for children, the emphasis shouldn't be on counting calories, it should be on healthy eating.

That's the message Cristall delivers to parents of the overweight children referred to the Shapedown 10-week intervention program.

"We're not out to skinny kids. We want to make sure they're healthy on the inside."

jsteffenhagen@vancouversun.com

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