

Are Fast-Food Advertisers Playing You?

How teens can outsmart fast-food advertising to avoid obesity.

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WebMD Feature

Did you ever think that watching your favorite TV show could be hazardous to your health?

It can be, when you consider what you're seeing during commercial breaks. A study of almost 100,000 food ads on TV showed that 89% of ads that teenagers see are promoting products high in fat, sugar, and/or sodium.

With the average teen in the U.S. seeing 15 food ads a day, commercials' influence on you can add up, especially when you consider that these ads can affect how you eat without you knowing it. And that's where the danger lies. A study by researchers at Yale University

found that kids eating a snack while watching TV ate 45% more during and after food ads.

So how do you spot unhealthy food advertisements and shield yourself against them?

Don't Get Duped by Fast-Food Ads

When you do see a fast-food commercial, think about the way advertisers are showing their products to you. Are they telling the whole story?

Just because fast-food marketers try to get you to buy fatty, sugary foods doesn't mean you have to let them get inside your head.

Supersized = Super-bad

Ads push supersized meals, promising better value for bigger portions. "These commercials remind you that you can get an inordinate amount of unhealthy food for a very low price," says Cara Natterson, MD, a pediatrician in Santa Monica, Calif. That can make them hard to resist when you're hungry and strapped for cash. But the ads don't tell you that jumbo portions are not good for your health; they just add more calories, sugar, and unhealthy fats. "The portion sizes that ads suggest are just completely out of control," Natterson explains.

Over the years, portion sizes -- or the amount of food being eaten in one sitting -- have grown by a lot. If you were served a cheeseburger 20 years ago, it likely would have weighed in at 333

calories. Order a cheeseburger today and you're likely to get something nearly double the size - 590 calories! That's too much to eat at once, especially when paired with fries and a soda, to be considered healthy. Over time, mega-meals can add up on your waistline and take a toll on your health. To burn off the difference in calories between the old portion and today's jumbo sandwich, a 130-pound person would need to lift weights for an hour and a half.

Hidden Health Hazards

Pausing to think about an ad before you buy (or even doing a little research about what you see) is important because it can be hard to spot the hazards at first glance. You may even think what's being sold is healthy because of how it is presented -- when it isn't, says Linda Bartholomay, LRD, a nutritional therapist at Sanford Health in Fargo, N.D.

For example, when Kentucky Fried Chicken started marketing the company's "trans-fat-free chicken," many consumers thought they were offering a healthy alternative to fried chicken, Bartholomay explains. But, while healthier than chicken fried with trans-fat, the KFC chicken was still deep-fried and not a health food.

Celebrity Endorsements

Another advertising tactic: Using celebs to try to persuade you to buy products. Don't fall for it. "There might be a famous snowboarder who's advertising a sports drink, so subconsciously you think, 'If I drink this, I'll do exciting things like snowboard too,'" Bartholomay tells WebMD. But being on the couch chugging a high-calorie, high-sugar drink is not the same as shredding down a mountain. Instead, get out and practice skateboarding or another activity you love.

TV Fast-Food Ads: How Teens Can Fight Back

Combat fast-food commercial messages by packing your own lunch and eating at home more often, Natterson says. And when you do choose fast food, do it wisely.

"We know teens are going to eat fast food. It's unrealistic to tell you to stop eating it," she says. "It's more realistic to understand that you will eat it -- and that's OK -- but help you to make good choices at the counter or drive-thru lane."

Try these tips:

Before you order, ask yourself, "Am I even hungry? Is this a good choice?" suggests Mindy Greenfield, a family life educator at Sanford Health in Sioux Falls, S.D. "If we stop and examine why we are eating, that will then become a habit, hopefully leading to healthier habits."

Skip the combo meals. Remember, you don't have to order a burger *and* a shake *and* fries, even if it is a good deal.

Avoid fried. Grilled or baked are usually healthier choices.

Eat only half of the bun.

Beware of sauces and spreads. Along with adding flavor, they can add extra calories and unhealthy fats. Ask for extras like mayo, sour cream, and gravy on the side, and only use a little.

Who says fries always have to go with a burger? Substitute a baked potato, side salad, or fruit for fries. When putting on salad dressing, use only one serving -- packets sometimes contain two or more servings. Reduced-fat dressings can also help you keep calories and unhealthy fats in check.

Eat baked chips instead of regular.

Drink water or something with few or no calories rather than high-sugar drinks like fruit juice and soda.

Consider this: milkshake now, maybe diabetes later? "You need to understand the long-term consequences of your day-in, day-out choices," Natterson says. "Weight gain, diabetes, and heart disease are tough sells for teens because you don't like to think long-term." But it's still important. You'll thank yourself later.

Beating Fast-Food Advertising at Its Own Game

Looking for an easy way to limit advertising's influence on you? Try avoiding ads. If you have a DVR, record your shows and fast-forward through all commercials. "If you don't have a DVR, use commercial time for other things," Greenfield says. "Grab a healthy snack, pick up a book, or get some water." Maybe:

- Dance
- Jog in place
- Jump around and be silly
- Do sit-ups or push-ups
- Squeeze in a quick chore

Use the time to *your* advantage instead of the advertisers'.

Work toward reducing your exposure to commercials even more. "Get away from the TV any time you can!" says Bartholomay. When you're sitting and watching TV, you are burning very

few calories, she explains. If you watch less TV, you'll see less food advertising -- and have extra time to be more active, too.

Don't Get Fries -- Get Even

Natterson would like to see people angrier about being misled by marketers and advertisers. "The obesity epidemic in this country should have people outraged, because that's the only way we are going to turn things around," she says. Teens, parents, food manufacturers, and sellers all need to take responsibility, in her view. "We need to be in this fight together because we are going to face the consequences together."

Just say "no" to fast-food advertisements. Say "yes" to a healthier lifestyle.

4. List and describe 5 ways in which the view audience can “fight back” against unhealthy food advertisements.

5. OPINION QUESTION – How are you personally affected by food advertisements?? Do you feel you are being exposed to an unhealthy lifestyle?? If so, how??