



# Incorporating Away-From-Home Food into a Healthy Eating Plan



## Summary

In our often time-pressed society, convenience is a way of life for many individuals. Foods and meals prepared outside of the home are an increasingly important part of the American diet.<sup>1, 2</sup> This is a trend that has coincided with a dramatic rise in the prevalence of obesity. While food, wherever prepared, is not the only factor affecting body weight, away-from-home food should be an important consideration for people aiming to maintain or lose weight. A growing body of literature indicates that the eating of away-from-home food can be a factor influencing energy intake. Informed choices pertaining to away-from-home food could help reduce calorie over-consumption and aid in weight management.

The objectives of this brief are to:

- ❖ Summarize environmental and societal changes that may contribute to the increased consumption of away-from-home food.
- ❖ Review the properties of away-from-home-food that may facilitate the over-consumption of energy.
- ❖ Examine studies investigating the relationship of away-from-home food with energy intake and obesity
- ❖ Present guidance to help navigate the wide range of away-from-home food choices available in today's food environment.

Much of this brief is based upon a recently published report: *The Keystone Forum on Away-From-Home Foods: Opportunities for Preventing Weight Gain and Obesity*.<sup>3</sup> The report resulted from consensus building workshops which included participants from the private sector, nongovernmental organizations,



academia, and government to “identify the state of the evidence, as well as, important knowledge gaps, regarding obesity and weight gain prevention and away-from-home foods.”

In this brief, away-from-home food refers to food prepared and purchased outside of the home. This includes full meals, single ready-to-eat items, take-away foods, and beverages purchased at restaurants, freshly-prepared food sections at grocery stores, institutional foodservice settings, and other outlets. The topic of school meals is sufficiently complex and important to merit consideration separately and is not examined here specifically.



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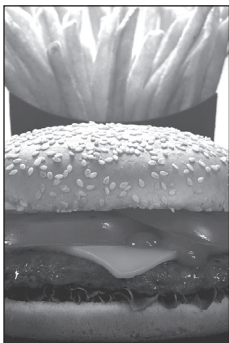
National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion  
Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity



## Environmental and societal changes that may contribute to the increased consumption of away-from-home food

There has been an increase in the consumption of away-from-home food in the United States. As depicted in Figure 1, the percentage of the food budget spent on away-from-home food has steadily increased since the mid-1970s.<sup>1,2,4</sup> This trend is projected to continue.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the proportion of calories provided by away-from-home food has increased in recent decades. In 1995, it accounted for 34% of total energy intake, an increase from 18% in 1977–1978.<sup>1,4</sup>

A variety of factors may be contributing to the increased consumption of away-from-home food. The total number of foodservice establishments in the United States has almost doubled in the last three



decades, increasing from 491,000 in 1972 to 878,000 in 2004.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, changes in the workforce, including a rise in dual-income households and women working outside the home have coincided with the demand for take-out meals and convenience in food preparation.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of the cause, away-from-home

food is and will continue to be an important part of the U. S. diet. The next section of this brief reviews the properties of these foods that may facilitate the over-consumption of energy and increase obesity risk.

## Features of away-from-home foods that may facilitate over-consumption

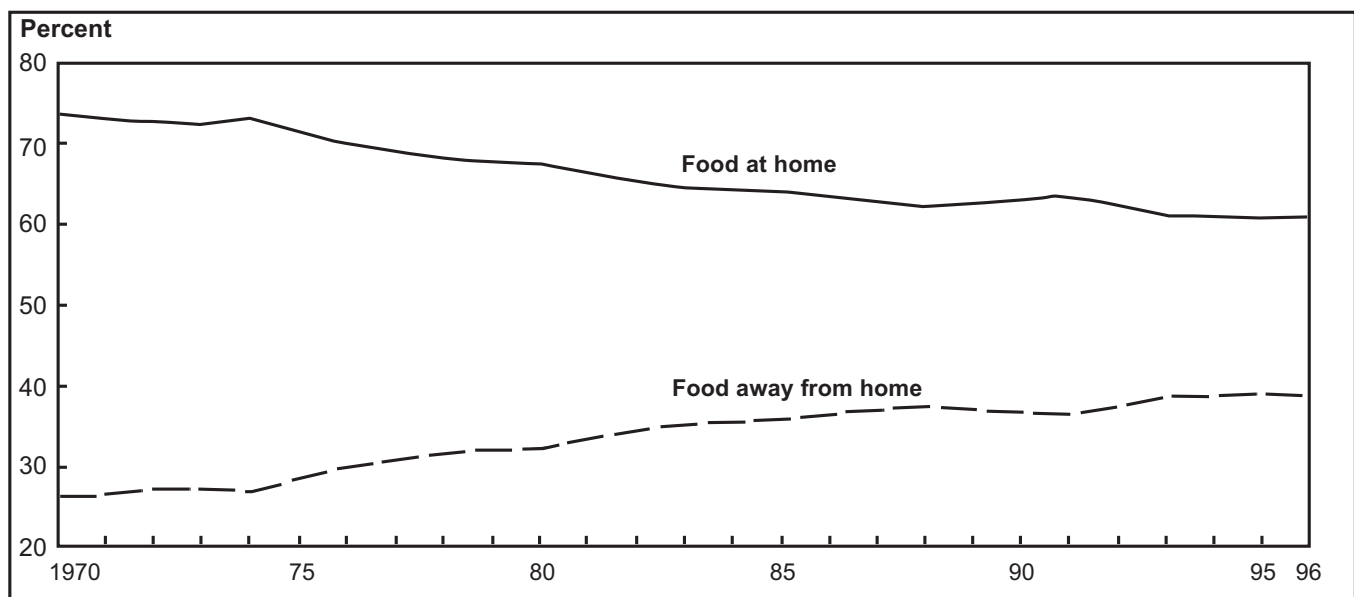
Eating at a restaurant may be viewed as a special opportunity for indulgence. Furthermore, the convivial atmosphere associated with restaurants and the consumption of alcohol may also contribute to over-consumption.<sup>7,8</sup> Before reviewing the research linking the consumption of away-from-home food to energy intake and weight status, it is important to consider other properties and factors associated with away-from-home food that may contribute to over-consumption.



### High energy density

There is a tendency to choose foods higher in energy density when dining out.<sup>7,9–11</sup> Energy density refers to the amount of calories (i.e., energy) contained in a unit of food (e.g., kcal/g). Foods high in energy density provide a relatively large number of

Figure 1. The percentage of the food budget spent on away-from-home food has increased steadily since the 1970s.<sup>1,2</sup>



calories for a particular weight of food; whereas, foods lower in energy density provide fewer calories in the same weight of food. High-energy-dense foods generally have a high fat content and contain few ingredients with a high moisture content such as fruits or vegetables.<sup>12</sup> A few examples of foods with a relatively high energy density are included in Table 1. Also included in this table are similar food choices that have a lower energy density. Short-term, laboratory-based studies have found that individuals consume more energy when presented with higher-energy-dense foods than with similar foods having a lower energy density.<sup>13–20</sup> Cross-sectional studies have also found that higher-energy-dense diets were associated with higher energy intakes as well as higher body weights.<sup>21–26</sup> Further research is needed exploring the energy density of away-from-home foods and how the energy density of these foods influences total energy intake and body weight.

### Large portion sizes

Another aspect of away-from-home food that may increase consumption is the availability of large portions sizes.<sup>7</sup> Large portions are increasingly common, from restaurants to supermarkets to vending machines. Portion sizes in the United States have increased both in restaurants and in the home over the past two decades.<sup>27</sup> Data indicate that people consume more when served large food portions. This has been shown for a variety of different types of foods in laboratory as well as real-world settings.<sup>7, 28–35</sup> For example, as depicted in Figure 2, a restaurant-based study found that when the size of a popular pasta dish was increased,



customers ate significantly more of that dish.<sup>7, 35</sup>

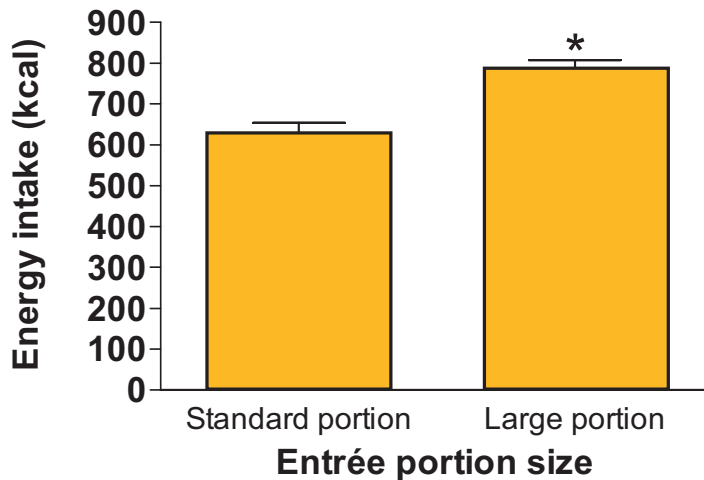
Large portions of food with a high energy density may be particularly problematic for people trying to control calorie intake. Laboratory-based studies have shown that, when both portion size and energy density are increased in a snack or meal, they have a synergistic effect in increasing overall energy intake.<sup>19, 36, 37</sup> One study found that subjects consumed 221 kcal more (56%) when served a large portion of a high-energy-dense entrée, compared to a small portion of a low-energy-dense entrée.<sup>36</sup>

Table 1. Examples of lower- and higher-energy dense foods that could be selected when choosing away-from-home entrees.

|                     | Lower-Energy Dense,<br>Lower-Calorie Option                | Higher-Energy-Dense,<br>Higher Calorie Option               |
|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| Pizza slice         | Thin crust cheese pizza<br>1 slice = 208 calories          | Thick crust meat pizza<br>1 slice = 305 calories            |
| Pasta with<br>sauce | Pasta with tomato sauce<br>1 cup = 206 calories            | Pasta with cream sauce<br>1 cup = 416 calories              |
| Sandwich            | Wrap with meat and vegetables<br>1 sandwich = 270 calories | Croissant with meat and cheese<br>1 sandwich = 356 calories |
| Meat Entrée         | Stir-fried beef with vegetables<br>1 cup = 165 calories    | Fried beef steak<br>1 medium steak = 588 calories           |

<sup>1</sup> Based on values from *Bowes & Church's Food Values of Portions Commonly Used* (59)

**Figure 2.** A study in a cafeteria-style restaurant tested whether increasing the portion size of a main-entrée pasta dish from 248 grams (standard portion, 422 kcal) to 377 grams (large portion, 633 kcal), while keeping the price the same, would affect how much people ate. Customers ate a significantly greater amount of the meal when served the large entrée, compared to the standard-sized portion.<sup>7,35</sup>



## Variety and palatability

Taste is a major factor influencing eating decisions.<sup>38</sup> People tend to eat more of foods that taste good to



them. Restaurants generally serve a variety of palatable foods, which can contribute to over-consumption.<sup>39</sup> While the palatability of a particular food declines as it is consumed, the appeal of other foods is not affected. Individuals thus are apt to have higher energy intakes when a variety of highly palatable foods are

available.<sup>40</sup> Most laboratory-based studies showing an increase in energy intake as variety is increased have used palatable, energy-dense foods. Two studies with free-living individuals, however, suggest that consuming a variety of low-energy-dense foods is associated with reduced energy intakes as well as lower body fat and greater weight loss.<sup>41, 42</sup>

## Away-from-home food, energy intake, and diet quality among youth and adults

The influence of away-from-home-food on energy intake and diet quality has not been extensively investigated. Most of the studies investigating these relationships have been cross-sectional and have only considered quick-service foods, which limits the conclusions that can be drawn. Several used data from the Continuing Survey of Food Intake by Individuals (CSFII). This is a population-based, cross-sectional study conducted by the U. S. Department of Agriculture which included two 24-hour dietary recalls to assess food intake.

One study using CSFII data was reported by Bowman and colleagues.<sup>10</sup> Using data from 6,212 individuals aged 4 to 19 years and collected in 1994 to 1996 and 1998, it found that 30% of the sample ate quick-service food on one of the two survey days. The children who ate quick-service food, compared with those who did not, consumed significantly more total energy (187 kcal), more total fat (9 g), more added sugars (26 g), more sugar-sweetened beverages (228 g), less fiber (-1.1 g), less milk (-65 g), and fewer fruits and non-starchy vegetables (-45 g). Among those consuming quick-service foods, energy intake was greater and diet quality was lower on days when quick-service foods were eaten. Similarly, Schmidt and colleagues found that consuming quick-service food was positively associated with intakes of energy, sodium, total fat, and saturated fat among a sample of 2,379 black and white adolescent girls, aged 9 to 19 years that participated in the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Growth and Health Study.<sup>43</sup>

Zoumas-Morse et. al., investigated adolescent intake of a broader spectrum of away-from-home-foods, including those from restaurants, delicatessens, stores, and cafeterias, as well as quick-service establishments.<sup>44</sup> Based on data from 811 individuals aged 7 to 17 years, it was found that children consumed almost twice as much energy when they ate a meal at a restaurant (765 calories) compared to an average meal at home (425 calories). Children and adolescents also consumed more energy from fat and saturated fat when eating at a restaurant compared to at home. Using data from the 1989–1991 CSFII, Lin and colleagues found that the foods

children ate from quick-service and other restaurants were higher in fat and saturated fat and lower in fiber, iron, calcium, and cholesterol than other foods.<sup>45</sup>

The relationship between away-from-home food and high energy intakes and poor diet quality has also been documented in adults. Using CSFII data from 17,370 individuals collected from 1994 to 1996 and in 1998, Paeratakul and colleagues found that both adults and children who reported eating quick-service foods on at least one of the two survey days had higher intakes of calories, fat, saturated fat, and sodium, and lower intakes of vitamins A and C, milk, fruits, and vegetables, compared to people who did not eat quick-service food.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Bowman and Vinyard, using CSFII 1994-96 data, found that, among 9,872 men and women, those who consumed quick-service food on one or both survey days had diets higher in energy and energy density than those who did not report consuming quick-service food.<sup>11</sup> They also found that those who consumed quick-service food had diets lower in fiber, vitamins A and C, carotenes, calcium, and magnesium. Satia and colleagues also found eating in quick-service restaurants to be associated with higher total fat intake, higher saturated fat intake, and lower vegetable intake among a sample of 658 African-American adults.<sup>47</sup> Similar results were presented for a group of postmenopausal women.<sup>48</sup>

These studies, which have mostly focused on quick-service food, indicate that consumption of away-from-home food is associated with diet quality and energy intake. Eating quick-service meals was linked to consuming more energy, more saturated fat, fewer fruits and vegetables, and less milk. The available data suggest that consumption of away-from-home food may have an adverse effect on dietary quality in ways that plausibly could increase obesity risk. Further studies are warranted, particularly studies comparing eating pattern on days when away-from-home food is and is not consumed, as well as, studies focusing on different types of restaurants.

## Away-from-home food and weight status

In light of the growing proportion of meals consumed outside of the home and the potential influence of these foods on energy intake, it is important to consider whether away-from-home foods contribute to overweight and obesity. A variety of different types of evidence support this hypothesis.

An ecological study reported by Maddock, found that states with higher levels of obesity had more quick-service restaurants per person.<sup>49</sup> While these were aggregate correlational data, they are supported by findings from other types of studies.



Two cross-sectional studies have used 1994–1996 CSFII data to explore relationships between away-from-home food and self-reported body weight. Bowman and Vinyard found that adults who reported eating quick-service food on at least one survey day had higher mean body mass index (BMI) values than those who did not eat quick-service food on either survey day.<sup>11</sup> When examining quick-service as well as other types of eating establishments, Binkley et al., also found that eating away-from-home food was related to obesity.<sup>50</sup>

Three additional cross-sectional studies have shown relationships between away-from-home food and adiposity. McCrory et al., found that the frequency of consuming restaurant food was associated positively with body fatness (partial  $r = 0.42$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ).<sup>51</sup> In a study with 658 African-American adults, Satia et al., found that individuals who reported eating quick-service food often had significantly higher BMI values than those who reported consuming these foods ‘rarely’ or ‘never’.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, Jeffery and French reported that consumption of quick-service meals was positively associated with BMI in women, but not in men, when examining data from 1,059 men and women.<sup>52</sup>

Experimental evidence suggesting a relationship between adiposity and quick-service food is provided by two studies reported by Ebbeling and colleagues.<sup>53</sup> These studies compared food intakes of 26 overweight and 28 lean adolescents aged 14 to 17 years. In one study, participants were provided with an “extra large” quick-service meal at a food court. They were instructed to eat as much or little

as desired. The overweight participants consumed more energy than the lean participants (1,860 vs. 1,458 kcal). In the second study, energy intake was assessed under free-living conditions for two days when quick-service food was consumed and for two days when it was not consumed. While the overweight participants consumed more energy on days when quick-service food was consumed (2,703 vs. 2,295 kcal/d), this effect was not observed among lean participants. While these studies suggest a link between quick-service food and obesity, further experimental studies are warranted.

Four longitudinal studies have examined the effect of quick-service food on weight status over time. With a cohort of 7,745 girls and 6,610 boys, aged 9 to 14 years, Taveras and colleagues found that, over a 1-year period, increased consumption of fried away-from-home food was associated with increased BMI values.<sup>54</sup> In another study with adolescents, Thompson et al., reported that among 101 girls aged 8 to 12 year, those who consumed quick-service food twice a week or more had a greater increase in BMI when they were 11 to 19 years than those who reported eating quick-service food once a week or less.<sup>55</sup> As part of a prospective intervention trial on weight gain prevention, French and colleagues examined the frequency of quick-service restaurant use in a community-based sample of 891 adult women.<sup>56</sup> During a 3-year period, increases in frequency of quick-service restaurant use were associated with increases in body weight. Additionally, Pereira et al. used data from the Coronary Artery Risk Development in Young Adults (CARDIA) study to investigate the association between quick-service habits and changes in bodyweight over a 15-year period.<sup>57</sup> This study included 3,031 black and white adult men and women from 18 to 30 years of age at baseline. Researchers found that an increase in quick-service meal frequency over 15 years was associated with weight gain. Specifically, participants who ate quick-service food more than twice a week at baseline and at the 15-year follow-up gained an extra 4.5 kg of body weight compared to those who consumed quick-service food less than once a week at these time points. While some, but not all, of these studies have controlled for total energy consumption,<sup>56,57</sup> these findings suggest there may be an association between eating away from home and overweight and obesity in children and adults.

A direct causal relationship between away-from-home foods and obesity has not, however, been established. Further research, particularly longitudinal studies, are needed to better understand the influence of away-from-home foods on body weight. Nevertheless, away-from-home foods are an increasingly important part of the American diet and individuals should ensure that these items are part of a balanced diet.<sup>1,2</sup>

## **Incorporating away-from-home food into a healthy eating plan**

With approximately 1/3 of daily calorie consumption in the United States coming from away-from-home foods it is important to consider how individuals can fit these items into a healthy eating plan.<sup>1,4</sup>

### *Tailor away-from-home meals to make them as healthful as possible.*

- ❖ Patronize establishments that offer a variety of food choices and are willing to make substitutions or changes.
- ❖ Look for lower-fat, lower calorie menu items:
  - Steamed, broiled, baked, roasted, or poached items tend to have a lower fat content than fried foods.
  - Choose lower-calorie sauces and condiments. For example, foods with butter and cream sauce are likely to have more fat than items with a broth or mustard sauce.
  - Select a low-calorie soup or salad as an appetizer.
  - Use nutrition information to guide food choices. Many restaurants have nutrition information available on-site or on websites. Patrons can examine this information before ordering to make the best food choices.
  - Modify a menu item to make it a healthier option. For example, ask for a main dish salad to be served with grilled chicken instead of fried chicken, choose a low fat or nonfat dressing, and order the dish without cheese and croutons.
- ❖ Treat this as an opportunity to eat more fruits and vegetables.
  - Order a vegetarian meal.
  - Substitute colorful vegetables for other side dishes. Have the entrée be accompanied by a healthfully-prepared salad, fruit, or steamed vegetables.
  - Select fresh fruit for dessert.
  - When at a buffet, make sure that a substantial

portion of the plate is covered by low calorie fruits and vegetables.

- ❖ Control food and beverage portions to make them appropriate for energy needs
  - Order a half-portion.
  - Share a meal with a companion.
  - Take half or more of the meal home. Having a portion of a meal boxed up before eating may reduce the temptation to overindulge.
  - Focus on food quality not quantity. Instead of placing value on large food portions, enjoy smaller portions of high quality food.

*When eating out is a family affair, lay the groundwork for a lifetime of healthful eating.*

- ❖ Serve as a good role model for children by practicing healthy eating habits.
- ❖ Choose kid-friendly restaurants that offer a variety of healthful items children will enjoy.
- ❖ When ordering a meal for a child:
  - Ask about alternative to French fries such as apple slices or apple sauce.
  - Order low fat or nonfat milk instead of a shake, soda, or other sugar-sweetened beverage.
  - If only deep fried or high-fat options are available on the children's menu, ask whether the chef can make a simple sandwich on whole grain bread such as a cheese sandwich.

*Reduce reliance on away-from-home food.*

- ❖ Pack healthy snacks to reduce the impulse visit to the vending machine.
- ❖ When cooking a healthful dinner at home, prepare extra food that can be taken for lunch or frozen for a busy day.
- ❖ When traveling, bring along nutritious foods that will not spoil, such as fresh fruits and vegetables or pack a cooler with items such as low-fat yogurt.

## Approaches to increasing access to healthful away-from-home foods

The Keystone Forum report, on which this brief is based, also encouraged restaurants, work sites, educational institutions, healthcare facilities, and faith-based organizations to offer and promote healthful items where foods and beverages are sold or made available for consumption. Some opportunities include:

- ❖ Adding new menu items and modifying existing items to increase the availability of healthful foods.

A modest decrease in fat, along with an increase in the vegetable content of many menu items, can reduce the calorie content without necessarily affecting taste.

- ❖ Conducting promotional activities and offering pricing incentives, which can help encourage the selection of nutritious items.
- ❖ Providing appropriate serving sizes of foods and beverages, which may help people control caloric intake.
- ❖ Increasing the availability of nutrition information and providing educational opportunities, which may help consumers make the most appropriate choices.

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