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Are Happy Meals doomed? 19 restaurant chains pledge healthier kids' meals

The fight against childhood obesity has gained new allies. Some 15,000 restaurants from 19 chains have agreed to offer low-calorie, lower-fat meals for children and adults.



Paola Beldran eats a healthy choice meal at a south Miami Burger King on Tuesday, July 12. 19 large restaurant chains – including Burger King, Chili's, IHOP and Friendly's – announced Wednesday that they will add healthier options to their children's menus. At least 15,000 restaurant locations will focus on increasing servings of fruits and vegetables, lean proteins, whole grains and low fat dairy. (J. Pat Carter / AP)

By [Chloe Stepney](#), Contributor
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When walking into a restaurant, which governs your food choices: taste or nutrition? How about your kids' choices?

In an effort to increase healthy options for consumers – especially children – 19 restaurant chains have pledged to offer meals that follow strict dietary guidelines, as part of a new initiative from the [National Restaurant Association](#) and Healthy Dining.

“We’ve got to change consumer behaviors,” says [Dr. Robert Post](#), deputy director of the [USDA Center for Nutrition, Policy and Promotions](#). “We need to reach people where they ... make food decisions everyday.”

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Nationwide, an estimated 10 percent of infants and toddlers are overweight, in addition to nearly 20 percent of 2- to 5-year-olds who are overweight or obese, according to the National Institute of Medicine.

Parents control the food choices for young kids, says Susan Babey, who researches fast food and dietary behavior at the [University of California, Los Angeles](#). “But parents can experience a lot of pressure – particularly when they’re out in public, and their kids express a particular desire.”

Marketing that promotes healthy choices could make all the difference, she suggests.

By volunteering in the Kids LiveWell initiative, restaurants agree to promote – and market – nutritious menu items, display nutrition facts, and offer meals that meet detailed dietary criteria:

- A full kid’s meal (entrée, side, and drink) must include two food groups without topping 600 calories.

- A side of 200 calories or less must be one full serving of a fruit, vegetable, whole grain, lean protein, or lower-fat dairy.
- Neither the entrée nor side can exceed specified levels of sugar or sodium, or calories from total fat, saturated fat, or trans fat.

Burger King will offer a 4-piece chicken tender meal with fat-free milk and BK Fresh Apple Fries. That provides one serving each of fruit and dairy for 350 total calories, fitting it tidily within the guidelines.

The [International House of Pancakes](#) will serve a scrambled egg and pancake meal with a side of fresh fruit totaling 260 calories.

But there's more to healthy eating than fewer calories, cautions [Kate Scarlata](#), a dietician and co-author of *Real People Need Real Food: A Guide to Healthy Eating for Families Living in a Fast Food World*.

"Sometimes this can be confusing for customers," Ms. Scarlata says. "You put this healthy food jargon out there – but define 'healthy'."

She thinks that a 600-calorie standard is high, and that the levels of sodium and sugar in the dietary requirements are still too generous.

"I can certainly applaud any organization or restaurant that provides better nutrition for children," Scarlata says. "I just don't want parents to go in and think Burger King has healthy options. It's improved."

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On Monday, first lady [Michelle Obama](#), who spearheads the Let's Move! campaign to fight childhood obesity, enjoyed some not-so-healthy food at the Washington Shake Shack diner: a burger, fries, chocolate shake, and [diet Coke](#).

"I don't want to live a life where I can never have [burgers and fries] again," she told [USA Today](#) last year. "And if we told families and children that that was the answer, we'd never get there."

You can still indulge in a burger-and-fries meal if you have an overall dietary plan, says [Judith Stern](#), an nutritionist at [University of California, Davis](#).

"You've got to take an approach that isn't, 'You're really bad, don't do this,'" Professor Stern says. "Food is meant to be enjoyed."

She suggests asking fast food restaurants to give you fewer French fries, or throwing away some of your buttery movie popcorn before taking your seat. "If you don't have it, you won't eat it."

Babey agrees. "People have a tendency to finish a meal – and it doesn't necessarily matter if something is 400 calories or 800 calories," she says.

"If kids can get healthier options with a kid's meal, that's an improvement," Babey says. "It remains to be seen if people will gravitate to them or not."

Restaurants participating in the Kids LiveWell initiative include: [Au Bon Pain](#), [Bonefish Grill](#), Burger King, Burgerville, Carrabba's Italian Grill, Chevys Fresh Mex, Chili's Grill & Bar, Corner Bakery Cafe, [Cracker Barrel](#), Denny's, [El Pollo Loco](#), Friendly's, IHOP, Joe's Crab Shack, [Outback Steakhouse](#), [Silver Diner](#), Sizzler, T-Bones Great American Eatery and pizza - adding up to some 15,000 locations nationwide.

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