

America's Worst Restaurants for Kids Revealed

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Eat This, Not That! Authors Grade 43 National Chains, 6 Receive an 'F'

Which kids' menus are most likely to make your children fat? A year-long study of children's meals has revealed vast dietary differences among America's favorite fast-food and sit-down chain restaurants, according to the authors of the new book **EAT THIS, NOT THAT! For Kids**. Co-authors David Zinczenko and Matt Goulding calculated calories, fat (trans- and saturated), and sodium, as well as the average number of calories per children's entree, and discovered that many of America's most popular chain restaurants are nutritional nightmares for America's children.

The authors compared children's entrees, credited restaurants for having healthy adult options that would appeal to the young palate, evaluated healthy vegetable and fruit sides and drink options that go beyond sugar-laden soda, and docked points for restaurants still dishing out unhealthy trans fats or for refusing to release any nutrition information to their customers.

The result is a Restaurant Report Card that holds each food chain accountable for the fare they're serving up -- to moms, dads, kids, teens, and everybody else -- along with a survival strategy for making it through any meal unscathed.

Did your favorite restaurant make the grade?

A

Chick-fil-A

Chick-fil-A excels in every category we tested for. With a slew of low-calorie sandwiches, the country's "healthiest" chicken nugget, a variety of solid sides like fresh fruit and soup that can be substituted into any meal, and nutritional brochures readily available for perusing at each location, Chick-fil-A earns the award for America's Healthiest Chain Restaurant (for kids, for the adults who drive them there, plus anybody else wise enough to make it their fast food choice).

Your Survival Strategy: Even the smartest kid in the class can still fail a test, so be on your toes at all times, even at Chick-fil-A. Limit salads with ranch or Caesar dressings, any sandwich with bacon, and make milkshakes a special treat, not an everyday beverage.

A-

Subway

A menu based on lean protein and vegetables is always going to score well in our book. With more than half a dozen sandwiches under 300 calories, plus a slew of soups and healthy sides to boot, Subway can satisfy even the pickiest eater without breaking the caloric bank.

But, despite what Jared may want you to believe, Subway is not nutritionally infallible: Those rosy calorie counts posted on the menu boards include neither cheese nor mayo (add 160 calories per 6-inch sub) and some of the toasted subs, like the Meatball Marinara, contain hefty doses of calories, saturated fat, and sodium.

Your Survival Strategy: Cornell researchers have discovered a "health halo" at Subway, which refers to the tendency to reward yourself or your kid with chips, cookies, and large soft drinks because the entree is healthy. Avoid the halo, and all will be well.

B+

Boston Market

With more than a dozen healthy vegetable sides and lean meats like turkey and roast sirloin on the menu, the low-cal, high-nutrient possibilities at Boston Market are endless. But with nearly a dozen calorie-packed sides and fatty meats like dark meat chicken and meat loaf (which contains an unfathomable 55 ingredients!), it's almost as easy to construct a lousy meal.

Your Survival Strategy: There are three simple steps to nutritional salvation: 1) Start with turkey, sirloin, or rotisserie chicken. 2) Add two noncreamy, nonstarchy vegetable sides. 3) Ignore all special items, such as pot pie and nearly all of the sandwiches.

B

McDonald's

Though not blessed with an abundance of healthy options, Mickey D's isn't burdened with any major calorie bombs, either. Kid standards like McNuggets and cheeseburgers are both in the acceptable 300-calorie range.

Your Survival Strategy: Apple Dippers and 2% milk with a small entree makes for a pretty decent meal-on-the-go. McDonald's quintessential Happy Meal(R) makes this possible -- just beware the usual French fries and soda pitfalls. Adults should go for a Quarter Pounder without cheese.

C+

Domino's

Domino's suffers the same pitfalls of any other pizza purveyor: too much cheese, bread, and greasy toppings. If you don't order carefully, your child's pizza might come laden with more than 350 calories per slice. To its credit, Domino's does keep the trans fat out of the pizza, and it also offers the lowest-calorie thin crust option out there.

Your Survival Strategy: Stick with the Crunchy Thin Crust pizzas sans sausage and pepperoni. If you must order meat, ask for ham. And whenever possible, try to sneak on a vegetable or two per pie.

C

Burger King

BK has only four legitimate kids' entrees on the menu, and none of them -- French Toast Sticks, hamburger, mac and cheese, chicken tenders -- are particularly healthy. And while the recent addition of Apple Fries provides a much-needed healthy side alternative for kids, the menu is still sullied with trans fats. BK pledged to follow in the wake of nearly every other chain restaurant and remove trans fats from the menu by the end of 2008, but so far, we've seen little action. In fact, a large order of Hash Browns has an outrageous 13 grams of the heart-threatening fat, and even an order of Cini-minis will add 4.5 grams of trans fats to your kid's breakfast.

Your Survival Strategy: Adults can sign on for the Whopper Junior and a Garden Salad, and escape with only 365 calories. The best kids' meal? A 4-piece Chicken Tenders(R), applesauce or Apple Fries, and water or milk. Beyond that, there is little hope of escaping unscathed.

D

Chipotle

We applaud Chipotle's commitment to high-quality produce and fresh meats, but even the most pristine ingredients can't limit the damage wrought by the massive portion sizes the chain serves up. The lack of options for kids means young eaters are forced to tussle with one of Chipotle's behemoth burritos or taco platters, which can easily top 1,000 calories. Don't think you'll escape by ordering up a salad, either -- even a leafy bowl at Chipotle can knock out more than half a day's worth of calories.

Your Survival Strategy: Stick to the crispy tacos or burrito bowls, or saw a burrito in thirds.

F

Applebee's, IHOP, Olive Garden, Outback, Red Lobster, T.G.I. Friday's

These titans of the restaurant industry are among the last national chains that don't provide nutritional information on their dishes. Even after years of communication with their representatives, we still hear the same old excuses: it's too pricey, it's too time-consuming, it's impossible to do accurately because their food is so fresh. Our response is simple: If every other chain restaurant in the country can do it, then why can't they? Recent New York legislation requiring these restaurants to run calorie counts on their menus gave diners a glimpse of what these establishments are hiding: At Friday's, no fewer than nine sandwiches and ten appetizers topple the 1000-calorie barrier, at IHOP, the "healthiest" entree-size salad has a staggering 1050 calories, and at Outback, even a simple order of salmon will wipe out 75% of your day's caloric allotment.

Your Survival Strategy: Write letters, make phone calls, beg, scream, and plead for these restaurants to provide nutritional information on all of their products. Ask them why they refuse to tell us the truth!

For a comprehensive A-to-F breakdown on 30 other chain restaurants -- plus the best and worst meals at each -- see the complete EAT THIS, NOT THAT! For Kids Restaurant Report Card at eatthis.com/restaurants.

EAT THIS, NOT THAT! For Kids is available nationwide on August 19th.

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