

# Fried and tested

An examination of the marketing of  
fast food to children



## About Consumers International (CI)

Consumers International (CI) is the only independent global campaigning voice for consumers. With over 220 member organisations in 115 countries we are building a powerful international consumer movement to help protect and empower consumers everywhere.

Consumers International is a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee in the UK (company number 4337865) and a registered charity (number 1122155).

For more information, visit [www.consumersinternational.org](http://www.consumersinternational.org)



This report is part of Junk Food Generation – the Consumers International campaign to stop the marketing of unhealthy food to children [www.junkfoodgeneration.org](http://www.junkfoodgeneration.org)

## Fried and tested

An examination of the marketing of fast food to children

ISBN 978-0-9560297-5-1

Published by Consumers International in September 2009



Consumers International  
24 Highbury Crescent  
London N5 1RX, UK  
email: [consint@consint.org](mailto:consint@consint.org)  
[www.consumersinternational.org](http://www.consumersinternational.org)



Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>

## **Fried and tested**

An examination of the marketing of fast food to children



## Credits

This report was written by Justin Macmullan, with the assistance of Tom McGrath and Marian Conn.

Key reviewers of the report included Sue Davies from Which? (UK), Luke Upchurch and Rosalchen Whitecross at CI.

Fourteen CI member organisations conducted research in their own countries, coordinated by the International Consumer Research and Testing (ICRT) organisation.

Design and typesetting: Andrea Carter

**We would like to thank the following CI members who carried out research in their countries.**

Argentina – Consumidores Argentinos

Brazil – IDEC: Instituto Brasileiro de Defesa de Defesa

Czech Republic – SOS: Consumers Defence Association of the Czech Republic

Denmark – The Danish Consumer Council

Fiji – Consumer Council of Fiji

India – Consumers Association of India

Italy – Altroconsumo

S. Korea – Consumers Korea

Malaysia – FOMCA: Federation of Malaysian Consumers Associations

Netherlands – Consumentenbond

Peru – ASPEX: Peruvian Association of Consumers and Users

Singapore – CASE: Consumers Association of Singapore

Spain – OCU: Organisation of Consumers and Users

UK – Which?



## Contents

<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>8</b>
Obesity and overweight	8
The fast food industry	8
The Junk Food Generation campaign	9
<b>Research methods</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Fast food and children: survey results from the UK</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Marketing to young children</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>How 'healthy' or 'unhealthy' are children's fast food meals?</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Marketing to children over 10</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>How 'healthy' or 'unhealthy' are adult fast food meals for children?</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Information to guide purchases</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Conclusions and recommendations</b>	<b>32</b>





# Executive summary

Fast food chains are now a common feature in cities and towns around the world and their brands are amongst the most recognised in the world. Their success however, has not come without criticism. Amongst the accusations made of them is the claim that their products and their marketing have contributed to rapid increases in overweight and obesity.

In the light of Consumers International's (CI) campaign for an international code on the marketing of energy-dense, nutrient-poor food to children, this survey looked at the products that these companies market to children and the marketing techniques that they use. The survey focused on McDonald's, Burger King and KFC, the three largest fast food companies in the world and covered 14 countries in Europe, Asia and Latin America.

This report recognises that the companies have made progress in reformulating their products to reduce the levels of fat, sugar and salt, and that in many of the surveyed outlets the companies offered 'healthier' options that gave the opportunity for parents and carers to choose meals with lower levels of fat, sugar and salt, as well as a greater variety of fruit and vegetables than in the past.

However, this is not to say that fast food is now a healthy option. Several children's meals still account for 40% or 50% of a child's guideline daily amount (GDA) of fat, sugar or salt and the range of fruit and vegetables is still limited. If a child eats fast food regularly or as a snack in between meals, as is suggested by a recent survey conducted by CI's UK member organisation 'Which?', this could contribute to them having higher levels of fat, sugar and salt in their diet than is recommended.

Of particular concern for our campaign is the fact that, whilst fast food chains have made some efforts to offer items with lower levels of fat, sugar and salt, the less healthy items are still marketed in the same way as the healthier options. Cartoons, collectable toys and games are still used to promote a meal that could be contributing 50% of a child's GDA for fat, sugar or salt.

The nature of the marketing used to promote children's menus can also mean that children are likely to grow out of the children's menus at a relatively young age and much of the marketing for a more teenage audience promotes items from the adult menu.

Levels of fat, sugar and salt can be significantly higher for meals on the adult menu. Many children will have grown up eating burgers, chicken pieces, fries and fizzy drinks as part of the children's menu and will expect this to continue through their teenage years. However, our survey of the signature meals for each chain revealed that these could account for 50% or 60% of a 15-18 year old boy's GDA of fat, sugar or salt and much more for a girl or for a younger child.

All three of the fast food chains examined in this report have made regional or national commitments on the marketing of food to children. However, these policies only cover children up to 12 years old and, crucially, are based on these companies' own nutritional criteria as to what is and what isn't suitable for marketing to children.

CI is calling for an international code on the marketing of food to children to provide clear guidance for government regulation. An international code would also provide a proper benchmark against which to judge company policies.



# Introduction

Levels of obesity and overweight have reached epidemic proportions. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that globally in 2005 1.6 billion adults were overweight and that this will rise to 2.3 billion in 2015. Over the same period, the number of obese adults will rise from 400 million to 700 million. Contrary to popular perceptions about obesity and overweight comes the fact that it is not just a concern for high income countries, as some of the highest rates of increase now occur in low and middle income countries where the problem of obesity and overweight can be found side by side with that of under nutrition.<sup>1</sup>

## Obesity and overweight

Obesity and overweight are major contributory factors for non-communicable diseases such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes and some cancers. Unlike communicable diseases, the spread of obesity and overweight is not carried by a virus but by changes in lifestyles and diets. As a result there is now a growing international focus on what can be done to improve people's diets and increase physical exercise. In particular it is hoped that strategies to encourage children to eat healthily and exercise more will reduce future rates of obesity and overweight.

The marketing of 'unhealthy' food to children is particularly important as it targets relatively vulnerable consumers who may not have developed their own ideas on diet and who may also struggle to differentiate between marketing and non-marketing. Children who grow up obese or overweight are more likely to suffer premature death and disability in adulthood.

## The fast food industry

Fast food has for several years been a target for public health experts and campaigners who allege that it is

having a detrimental impact on the population's health. In response, some companies have changed and adapted some of their practices including reformulating products to reduce levels of fat, sugar and salt, providing more information to consumers and committing to changes in their marketing practices.

The three fast food chains covered by this survey were chosen due to their size and international reach – each of them represents a truly global operation with marketing budgets to match.

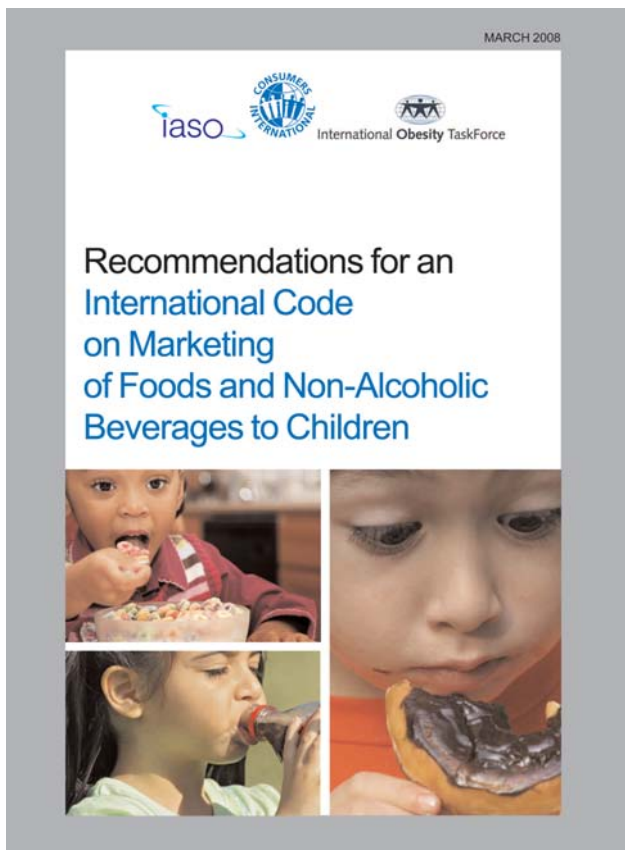
- **McDonald's** is the largest fast food chain in the world and 'operates 31,000 local restaurants serving more than 58 million people in 118 countries each day.'<sup>2</sup>
- **Burger King** is the second largest fast food hamburger chain in the world and 'operates more than 11,800 restaurants in all 50 US states and in 74 countries and U.S. territories worldwide.'<sup>3</sup>
- **Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC)** is owned by Yum brands and is 'the world's most popular chicken restaurant chain. There are over 15,000 KFC outlets in 105 countries and territories around the world.'<sup>4</sup>

### Fast food companies' global advertising spend in 2007

Fast food company	Estimated advertising spend
McDonald's	\$1740 million
Yum brands*	\$1238 million
Burger King Holdings	\$356million

\* Yum brands is the parent company for KFC as well as Pizza Hut, Tacco Bell and other fast food outlets. The advertising spend refers to the parent company's advertising budget.

## The Junk Food Generation campaign



*You can download a copy of the CI and International Obesity Taskforce (IOTF) Code and sign up in support of the Code at [www.junkfoodgeneration.org](http://www.junkfoodgeneration.org).*

In 2006 the World Health Assembly (WHA) passed a resolution calling on the WHO to make recommendations on the marketing of food to children. The resolution fitted into a wider WHO strategy on diet, physical activity and health.

This strategy stated that, "Food advertising affects food choices and influences dietary habits. Food and beverage advertisements should not exploit children's inexperience or credulity. Messages that encourage unhealthy dietary practices or physical inactivity should be discouraged, and positive, healthy messages encouraged. Governments

should work with consumer groups and the private sector (including advertising) to develop appropriate multi-sectoral approaches to deal with the marketing of food to children, and to deal with such issues as sponsorship, promotion and advertising."<sup>5</sup>

In response to the WHA resolution CI, working with the International Obesity Task Force (IOTF), developed a set of recommendations for an international code on the marketing of food and non-alcoholic beverages to children.

The CI/IOTF recommendations call for an international code on the marketing of food to children to be implemented by national governments and food companies.

The recommendations target the marketing of energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods that are high in fat, sugar and salt to children up to 16 years old. Its demands include:

- A ban on radio or TV adverts promoting unhealthy food between 06.00 and 21.00.
- No marketing of unhealthy food to children using new media (such as websites, social networking sites and text messaging).
- No promotion of unhealthy food in schools.
- No inclusion of free gifts, toys or collectable items, which appeal to children to promote unhealthy foods.
- No use of celebrities, cartoon characters, competitions or free gifts to market unhealthy food.

In response to campaigning for restrictions on the marketing of food to children the food and drink industry has introduced a number of pledges and commitments.

These codes vary in terms of the:

- types of food included and excluded
- countries covered
- definition of a child
- types of marketing included.



# Research methods

This survey covers the menus and marketing techniques of three major multinational fast food companies - Burger King, KFC and McDonald's. Research was carried out in 14 countries in Asia, Europe and Latin America between March and April 2009. Project partners also surveyed national fast food chains and this information is presented in their national publications.

Countries involved in the survey	
Argentina	South Korea
Brazil	Malaysia
Czech Republic	Netherlands
Denmark	Peru
Fiji	Singapore
India	Spain
Italy	UK

A record was made of the different media that the fast food chains use to market their products to children. These included packaging, marketing and facilities in their restaurants and the location of those restaurants, online marketing and TV advertising. The marketing techniques that were used were benchmarked against criteria drawn from the CI/IOTF recommendations on the marketing of food to children.

In nearly all countries information was gathered on the nutritional content of the food that is being marketed to children and in particular the levels of energy, fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt. Information provided by the company either in store or on their website was used. Gaps in the provision of information made it impossible to get a complete picture in all countries. The availability of such information was also recorded.

As fast food marketing often promotes the brand or a particular menu (as opposed to a specific product) we asked consumer organisations in each participating country to choose what they thought would be a 'healthy' meal from the children's menu and an 'unhealthy' meal from the children's menu.

The marketing of children's menus only appeals to relatively young children (under the age of nine or ten years) so project partners also collected nutritional information of the 'signature meal' from the adult menu to get an indication of the sort of meals that teenagers might be consuming.

In the absence of agreed international nutritional criteria, individual products were assessed according to the criteria of the UK Food Standards Authority Traffic Light Labelling scheme (see Table 1).

Under this scheme high levels merit a red traffic light on the front of the pack, while low levels merit a green traffic light and intermediary levels an amber traffic light. The UK system is not compulsory and some companies choose not to use it.

To assess the nutritional impact of a meal we also calculated the calories per portion, as well as the grams of fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt for each meal. Finally we calculated what proportion of a child's GDA the meal would account for using the guideline daily amounts used in the UK (see Table 2).

The marketing used by fast food companies appeared to break down into marketing for children's meals that targeted children up to the age of about 10 years and marketing for products on the adult menu that might appeal to a teenage audience. In assessing the nutritional content of each menu we compared the meal against the GDA for a boy in the oldest age group possible for that

age. So for the children’s meal we have used the GDA for a boy aged 7-10 years and for the adult menu we have used a boy aged 15-18 years. However, it should be noted that using the GDA for a girl or a younger age group can result in the meal accounting for a larger proportion of the child’s GDA.

The survey used the nutritional information provided by the companies; no tests were conducted to determine the accuracy of this information. There were gaps in the information we had to work with, as some companies do not publish all the nutritional information in some countries.

**Table 1: The UK ‘traffic light’ criteria for labeling fat, saturated fat, salt and sugar levels in food**

Quantities per 100g food (different figures apply for beverages)

	Low	Medium	High
<b>Fat</b>	3g	3g up to 20g	over 20g
<b>Saturated fat</b>	up to 1.5g	1.5g to 5g	over 5g
<b>Salt</b>	up to 0.3g	0.3g up to 1.5g	over 1.5g
<b>Sugar</b>	up to 5g total sugars	5g total sugars up to 12.5g added sugars	over 12.5g added sugars

UK Food Standards Agency. Front-of-pack Traffic light signpost labelling. Technical Guidance, Issue 2, November 2007. [www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/frontofpackguidance2.pdf](http://www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/frontofpackguidance2.pdf)

**Table 2: Guideline daily amounts (GDAs) for children and teenagers**

<b>Girls</b>				
	4-6 years	7-10 years	11-14 years	15-18 years
Energy (calories)	1,550	1,750	1,850	2,100
Fat	60	70	70	80
Saturated fat	20	20	25	25
Sugar	75	85	90	105
Salt	3	5	6	6

<b>Boys</b>				
	4-6 years	7-10 years	11-14 years	15-18 years
Energy (calories)	1,700	1,950	2,200	2,750
Fat	65	75	85	105
Saturated fat	20	25	25	35
Sugar	85	100	110	140
Salt	3	5	6	6

Report of the IGD/PIC Industry Nutrition Strategy Group. Technical Working Group on Guideline Daily Amounts (GDAs) 2005. (This report is available upon request from <http://www.igd.com/index.asp?id=1&fid=5&sid=42&tid=62>)



# Fast food and children: survey results from the UK

Much of the impact of fast food on children's diets depends on how often they visit fast food outlets and what they eat when they are there.

A recent survey by Which?, CI's member organisation in the UK, looked at children's fast food habits in the UK. The survey revealed that nearly three quarters of children in the UK visit one of the three main fast food chains at least three times a month and they consumed **45-51%** of their GDA for fat, sugar and salt the last time they visited.

The survey involved 1,003 children aged between 8 and 15.

The results showed that **72%** of the children surveyed had been to McDonald's, Burger King or KFC at least once in the last month and on average they had visited one of the chains three times during that month. Perhaps unsurprisingly older boys appeared to be the most frequent visitors with a third of boys aged 12 to 15 visiting one of the chains at least once a week.

The survey also confirmed that the marketing of children's meals is appealing to a relatively young age group. Amongst 8-11 year olds, **29%** said toys and games were an important reason why they preferred one chain to another – this dropped to just 4% amongst 12-15 year olds. Generally the children surveyed visit fast food chains for a meal. However, older children are more likely to visit for a snack. It is important to note that 24% of those going to McDonald's for a 'snack' still had a 'classic meal'.

**On average children consumed 45-51% of their GDA for fat, sugar and salt the last time they visited**

On average, children visiting the fast food chains said they ate or drank 3.6 items off the menu at their last visit and on average consumed **45-51%** of their GDA for fat, sugar and salt the last time they visited.

- McDonald's – 44% Kcals GDA
- KFC – 46% Kcals GDA
- Burger King – 47% Kcals GDA

Unsurprisingly, children visiting for a meal consumed a greater proportion of their calories for the day, but proportions were high even for snacks: 34% of GDA for a snack at KFC and 38% of GDA for a snack at Burger King or McDonald's.

Children consumed a greater percentage of their GDA if they were older and if they were with their friends, rather than with their parents.



# Marketing to young children

McDonald's, Burger King and KFC all use a variety of marketing techniques to make their products appealing to young children. Most of this marketing promotes their children's menus, for instance the 'Happy Meal' for McDonald's and the 'Kids Meal' for Burger King and KFC. However, some of the marketing is more generic and promotes the company or the brand – for instance the clown 'Ronald McDonald' is linked to the brand

McDonald's rather than a particular menu, and facilities such as play areas make the restaurants attractive to children but do not promote a particular menu.

Some restaurants we visited offered 'healthier' options in the children's menu however the marketing techniques below apply to all the menu items including the 'less healthy' options.

## Packaging of children's meals

### Use of cartoon characters



*Burger King Magic Box Kids' Meal from Argentina with colourful packaging and cartoon characters.*



*McDonald's Happy Meal box from the Netherlands with 'Hello Kitty' cartoon characters.*



*KFC Chicky box from Spain with their own brand cartoon mascot.*

## Games, puzzles and competitions



Burger King's Kid's Meal box from Malaysia with a competition to 'design a toy'.



KFC Chicky Meal packaging from Singapore with games for children.

## Movie tie-ins



McDonald's Happy Meal box in the UK with a tie-in with the children's film *Monsters vs Aliens*.

## Images of children



A McDonald's Happy meal cup from Argentina with pictures of children and slogans such as 'I love being a child'.



McDonald's Happy Meal box from Singapore with images of children.

## Collectable toys

Collectable toys are used by all the fast food chains to encourage regular visits. Displays in the outlets remind children how many toys are available.



*Burger King's Kids Meal offers collectable cartoon toys.*



*A McDonald's display in Argentina reminds children that there are seven toys to collect.*



*McDonald's website in Singapore shows the current Happy Meal promotion and toys. The message encourages children to collect the entire 14 toys in the series.*

[www.mcdonalds.com.sg/whatson\\_currpromo.html](http://www.mcdonalds.com.sg/whatson_currpromo.html)

## In-store facilities and displays



*A McDonald's outlet in Fiji offers a large play area for children.*



*A KFC drive-through outlet in the Netherlands includes a large kids' zone including climbing facilities.*

## In-store facilities and displays (cont'd)



Baby chairs in McDonald's outlets in Argentina carry an image of a burger, French fries and a soda.



Posters in McDonald's outlets in the Netherlands promote the film tie-in with Monsters vs Aliens.



In-store television screens in KFC outlets in the Netherlands play advertisements for the Kids meal.

## Websites

### Cartoon characters



Burger King's Club BK website in the UK features cartoon characters.  
[www.clubbk.com](http://www.clubbk.com)

### Clubs



The KFC chicky club in Singapore gives children access to games, a mailing list, comics etc.  
<http://www.chickyclub.com.sg>

### Interactive games and competitions



The KFC website in the Czech Republic gives children the chance to win a prize for their drawings.  
<http://www.kfc.cz/index.php?sec=souteze-pro-deti>



The KFC website in Peru promotes a tie-in with the movie the X men Origins: Wolverine.  
[http://www.kfc.com.pe/content/index\\_ninos.php](http://www.kfc.com.pe/content/index_ninos.php)

## Television Adverts

---

### Movie tie-ins

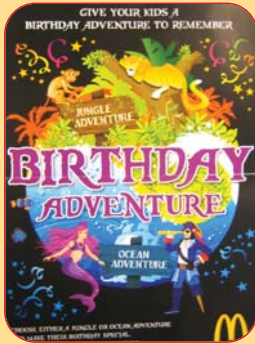
A McDonald's advert aired repeatedly in Brazil promoted the Happy Meal tie-in with the movie "Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian". In the advert animated characters from the film are seen eating Happy Meals. The Happy Meal packaging and free gifts are clearly visible, helping children to recognize these products when visiting a restaurant.

### Time of airing

In many cases advertisements were aired outside school hours during children's programming when children were likely to be at home and watching TV. The TV programmes also make the possibility of a child audience likely. McDonald's spots were aired during Power Rangers in Fiji, and during cartoons such as Tom and Jerry, Richie Rich and Daffy Duck in India.

### Cartoon characters and event sponsorship

In Singapore an advert promoting KFC's Chicky Club appeared during children's shows like My Little Pony, Power Rangers, Pokemon and Digimon. The advert showed children having fun at a KFC 'Chicky' event. KFC's kids mascot 'Chicky' was shown mingling with happy children. It also featured kids being interviewed. At the end, children were shown happily tucking into their 'KFC Treats'.



A McDonald's flyer in the UK encourages parents to hold their children's parties in a dedicated room inside the restaurant.



The Burger King website in Argentina markets Magic children's birthday parties to parents/carers. The child whose birthday it is receives a present and a combo meal every month for one year. [www.burgerking.com.ar](http://www.burgerking.com.ar)



A poster in McDonald's in Argentina draws attention to the 'Jaja World' kids area where 'Children have fun. Parents have fun'.



# How 'healthy' or 'unhealthy' are children's fast food meals?

Fast food is traditionally seen as being a relatively unhealthy type of food. However, in recent years fast food companies claim that they have reformulated their products to reduce levels of fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt and now offer a greater choice of fruit and vegetables.

Our survey of children's meals revealed that this certainly appears to have had some impact in some areas. Very few of the individual food items on children's menus were found to be high in fat or salt according to the UK Food Standards Agency (FSA) criteria for traffic light labelling which measures levels of nutrients per 100g.

Levels of saturated fat were still found to be high in some countries for some items according to the UK FSA criteria. Cheeseburgers in particular had high levels of saturated fat. For example, the cheeseburger that came with the children's meal at Burger King in the Netherlands had 5.4g of saturated fat per 100g. Cheeseburgers in other chains and countries often had just over or just under 5g of saturated fat per 100g - the level considered high by the UK FSA.

Sugar levels in meals were frequently high as a result of some of the drinks that are regularly sold as part of a children's meal. A typical example is the small Coke sold with the McDonald's 'Happy Meal' in Malaysia that contains 10.9g of sugar per 100ml. This is approximately 70% more than the 6.3g of added sugar per 100ml that is considered high by the UK FSA.

All the fast food chains included in the survey continue to market these drinks as part of their children's meals even though this contradicts the policies of Coca Cola and

PepsiCo who manufacture the drinks. Both companies have made commitments not to market their products to children under 12.

## Children's fast food meals as a percentage of GDA

### What's in the box?

In order to reflect the range of products that are being marketed to children we asked consumer organisations in 14 countries to choose a 'healthy' kids meal and an 'unhealthy' kids meal. The meal contents varied from country to country according to what was available and what the local consumer organisation had chosen. In many cases the differing results reflected the difficulty that parents and carers can have in identifying a healthy choice. However, the following is an indication of a typical meal.

#### Kid's meal 'unhealthy'

- cheeseburger
- fries
- desert
- fizzy drink/milkshake

#### Kids meal 'healthy'

- chicken strips
- apple sticks/carrot sticks/maize
- water/juice

Whilst many of the individual products in children’s meals appear to have been reformulated to reduce the levels of fat, sugar and salt, several are only a few grams below the level considered high, so the effect of putting these products together in a meal means that a child can still be consuming a large proportion of their GDA in one meal.

As this survey was concerned about the marketing of food that is high in fat, sugar and salt the summaries below relate to the meals that consumer organisations in the participating countries chose as ‘unhealthy’ meals. It should be noted that these meals tended to contain the items that are most readily associated with fast food chains for instance burgers, fries and fizzy drinks. All of the meals were also marketed directly at children. The majority of these meals exceeded a third of a child’s GDA for calories, fat, saturated fat, sugar or salt, with some exceeding 40% or even 50%.

A meal that contributes more than 50% towards a child’s GDA is obviously a cause of concern – particularly if the child is regularly eating this sort of meal. However a child consuming a third of their GDA of calories, fat, sugar or salt in one meal may seem reasonable if that is their main meal of the day. However where these meals are eaten as a snack – taken between meals - this is of greater concern.

### Calories

Of the 22 meals that we were able to collect nutritional data for, 16 would have resulted in a child consuming more than a third of their GDA for calories. Of these five

**The child’s meal accounts for more than 40% of the GDA for salt if the child is aged between seven and ten but it accounts for more than 70% if the child is aged between four and six.**

accounted for more than 40% and one more than 50%. The results suggested that levels of energy were consistent across most chains and countries.

### Fat

Of the 23 meals that we were able to collect nutritional data for, 12 would have resulted in a child consuming more than a third of their GDA for calories. Of these four were above 40% and one above 50%.

### Saturated fat

Fewer of the fast food chains gave information about the levels of saturated fat in their meals. Out of the 16 meals for which we were able to collect information, 11 of the meals would have contributed more than a third of a child’s GDA. Of which six would have contributed more than 40% and one more than 50%.

### Sugar

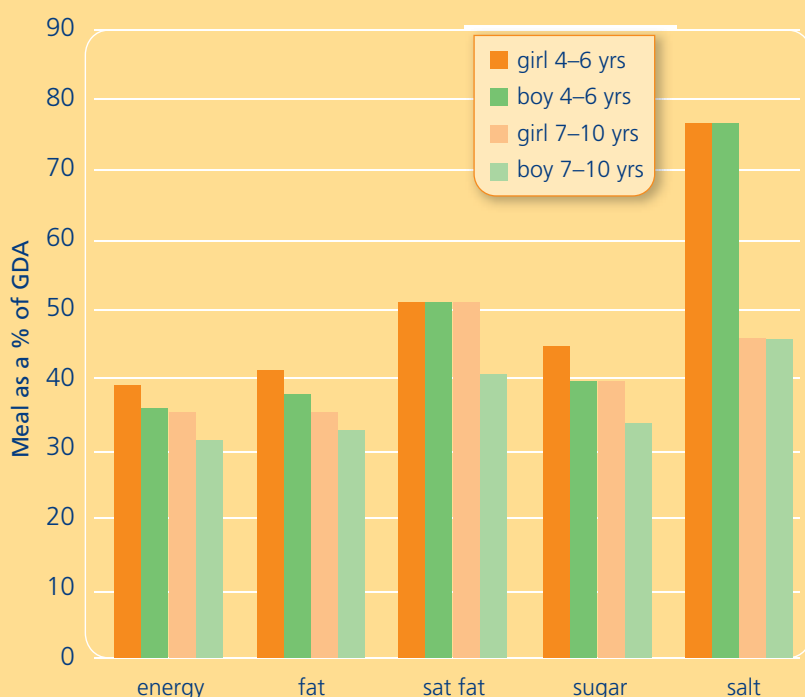
Again there was a lack of information available about the sugar levels in children’s meals. Information was collected

#### Age matters

In assessing the fast food children’s meals we have used the GDA for a boy aged between seven and ten years old. However a younger child will have a lower GDA and, for some nutrients the GDA for girls is lower than for boys.

Using a Burger King child’s meal from Italy as an example, Graph 1 shows how the age of a child affects the percentage of the child’s GDA in a meal. For example, the child’s meal accounts for more than 40% of the GDA for salt if the child is aged between seven and ten but it accounts for more than 70% if the child is aged between four and six. Much of the marketing for children’s meals could be said to be appealing to children between four and six years old.

**Graph 1: Typical children’s meal: % of GDA by age and gender**



about the sugar levels in 16 meals, however 15 would have contributed to more than a third of a child's GDA, with nine contributing more than 40% and three more than 50%. High levels of sugar were almost entirely a result of fast food chains including fizzy drinks in the children's menus. However adding any of the deserts can also add a significant amount of sugar.

### Salt

Out of the 21 meals for which we were able to gather nutritional information 11 would have contributed more than a third to a child's GDA of which nine accounted for more than 40% and six more than 50%. Based on the information we gathered high salt levels appeared to be a problem in European countries more than in Asian countries.

Two of the meals that were selected as 'healthier' options also had levels of salt that would have accounted for more than a third of a child's GDA.

We asked the consumer organisations taking part in the survey to choose a 'healthier' option and a 'less healthy' option from the children's menu. The 'less healthy' options tended to include items such as cheeseburgers, fries, fizzy drinks as well as deserts where this was offered as part of a meal. 'Healthier' options included items such as chicken, fruit or vegetables and water or juice where these items were available.

The graphs below contrast the levels of calories, fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt found in the meals. Where a healthier option records high levels of calories, fat, sugar or salt, it is an indication that there either was not a genuinely healthy option available on the menu or it was difficult to identify. Where the menu does not contain 'healthier' options it is obviously much harder to spot the meal that will include less fat, sugar and salt.

Generally speaking where different options are available, parents and carers can reduce the levels of fat, sugar and salt their children consume by choosing carefully from the menu.

### Healthier choices?

All of the fast food chain restaurants included in this survey offered a variety of options in their children's menus. In some countries 'healthier' options were included in the menu, whilst in other countries consumers do not have an explicit 'healthier' option but could choose one meal over another in the belief that it is healthier.

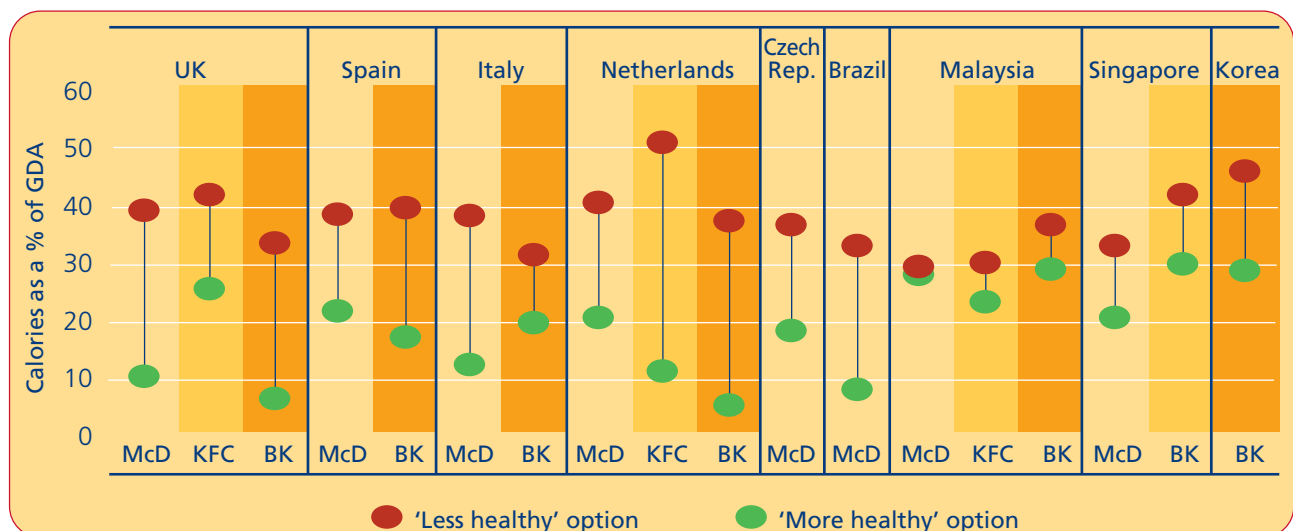
Our research found that the choice of meal can make a considerable difference to the levels of fat, sugar and salt that children consume. This is especially true where there are 'healthy' options on the menu.

However the primary concern of this report is whether fast food chains are marketing meals that are high in fat, sugar and salt to children. This survey found that whilst some chains have certainly introduced 'healthier' options, they are continuing to use marketing techniques such as gifts, games and vouchers to promote 'less healthy' meals to children.

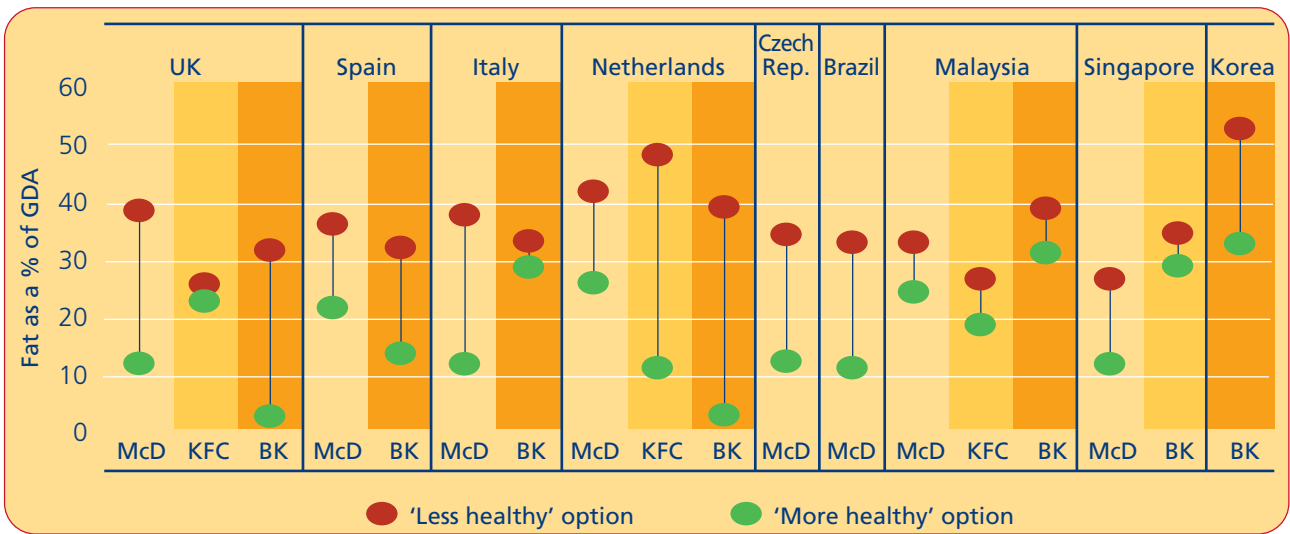
**High levels of sugar were almost entirely a result of fast food chains including fizzy drinks in the children's menus.**

## Children's fast food meals: levels of calories, fat, sugar and salt

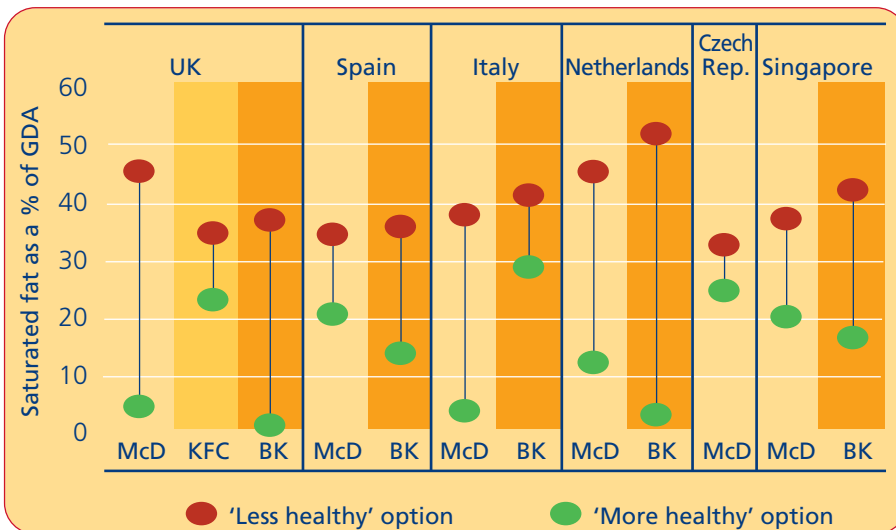
Graph 2: Energy (calories) as a % of the GDA for a boy aged 7-10



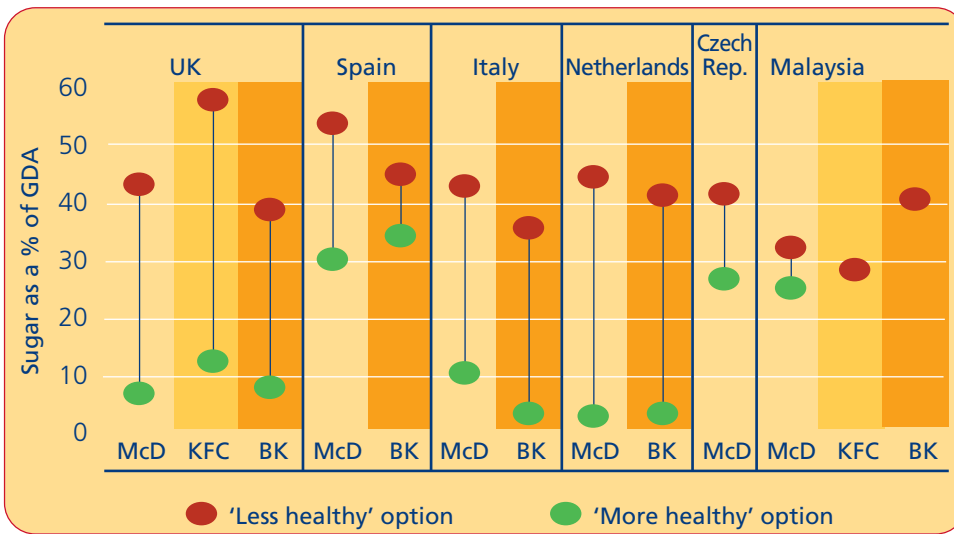
Graph 3: Fat as a % of the GDA for a boy aged 7-10



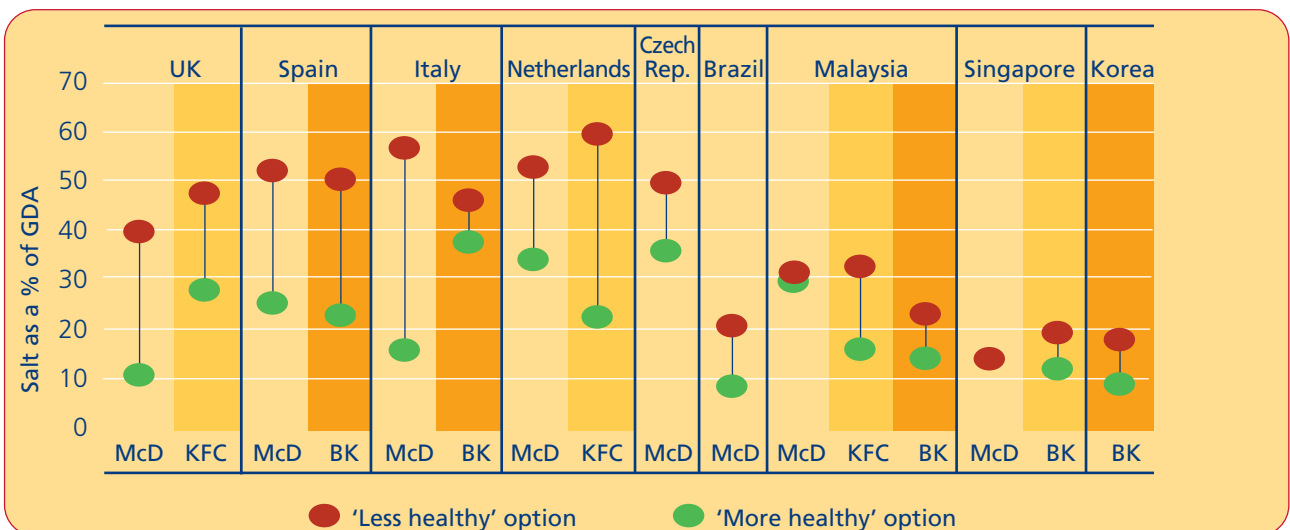
Graph 4: Saturated fat as a % of the GDA for a boy aged 7-10



Graph 5: Sugar as a % of the GDA for a boy aged 7-10



Graph 6: Salt as a % of the GDA for a boy aged 7-10





# Marketing to children over 10

The marketing of fast food children's menus is targeted at a relatively young age group. In many cases the cartoons and images that are used are unlikely to appeal to children over 9 or 10 years old; the style of marketing could even be said to be sending children of this age a strong signal that they are too old for the children's menu and should be making choices from the adult menu.

Almost all the food companies that have made commitments on the marketing of food to children choose to limit their commitments to children under 12. The fast food companies included in this survey have taken a similar approach in the regional and national commitments that they have made.

## Location



A Burger King outlet in Singapore is located close to schools. Young students hang out in the mall and a poster includes the caption 'It's wonderful to be a student' and promotes a student meal.

## Websites



The KFC website in the Czech Republic has a tie-in with the Simpsons giving teenagers the chance to play games, download pictures, watch videos.

## Gifts



Burger King in the Netherlands offers 'Cool USB sticks'

## Packaging



McDonald's packaging in some countries features young people taking part in active sports such as skateboarding and water-skiing. The examples above come from the Czech Republic and Spain.

## TU advertising



A Burger King advert in Spain promotes the Texican Whopper at times when children are likely to be watching.



A KFC advert in Malaysia features teenagers in a film tie-in with "X-MEN Origins: Wolverine" and appears at time when children are likely to be watching.



A McDonald's advert in the Netherlands promotes items from the adult menu and is clearly designed to appeal to a teenage audience.



A McDonald's advert in Spain features Ricky Rubio, a basketball star popular with teenagers. The advert promotes the one-euro menu that may also appeal to teenagers due to the low price.



# How 'healthy' or 'unhealthy' are adult fast food meals for children?

## What's in the bag?

We asked consumer organisations in 14 countries to identify the 'signature meal' for each fast food chain. The meal contents varied slightly from country to country according to what was available and the items that the local consumer organisation identified as being part of the meal. However a typical meal for each chain contained:

- Big Mac/Whopper/Chicken drumstick and two thighs
- French fries
- Fizzy drink

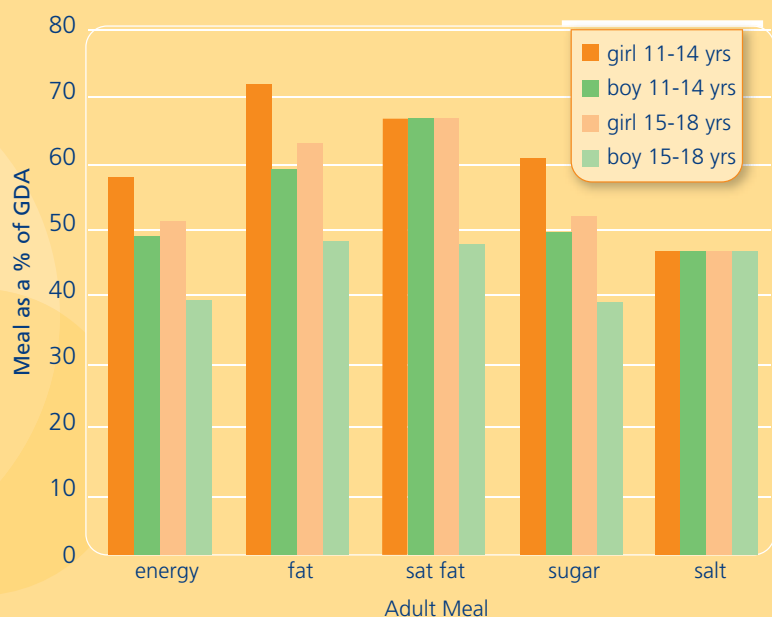
Our research showed that items included in fast food chains' signature meals often have levels of fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt that are high according to the UK FSA traffic light criteria. Whilst there are products on the adult menu with lower levels of fat, sugar and salt the companies marketing makes no differentiation between products with high levels of fat, sugar and salt and products with lower levels.

As a result the signature meals for the fast food chains included in this survey account for a much higher proportion of a child's GDA – even allowing for the fact that their GDA has increased with age. Levels of fat were particularly high – often accounting for more than 40% of a 15-18 year old child's GDA. Levels of salt were also very high in several of the European countries. Burger

## Age matters

We compared the levels of calories, fat, sugar and salt in the adult meals with the GDA for a 15-18 year old boy. However the meals may account for higher percentages for girls of the same age or boys and girls aged 11-14. The graph shows how an adult 'Whopper' meal sold in Italy can account for a much higher proportion of a child's GDA depending on their age and gender. For example the meal accounts for more than 40% of the GDA for fat if the boy is aged between 15 and 18, however it accounts for more than 70% of the GDA for fat for a girl aged between 11 and 14.

Graph 7: Typical adult meal: % of GDA by age and gender



King tended to have the highest number of calories and levels of fat and saturated fat per meal in the countries surveyed.

Children who have grown up eating burgers or chicken pieces, fries and fizzy drinks as part of the children's menu and expect this sort of meal from a fast food chain will be consuming considerably higher levels of fat, sugar

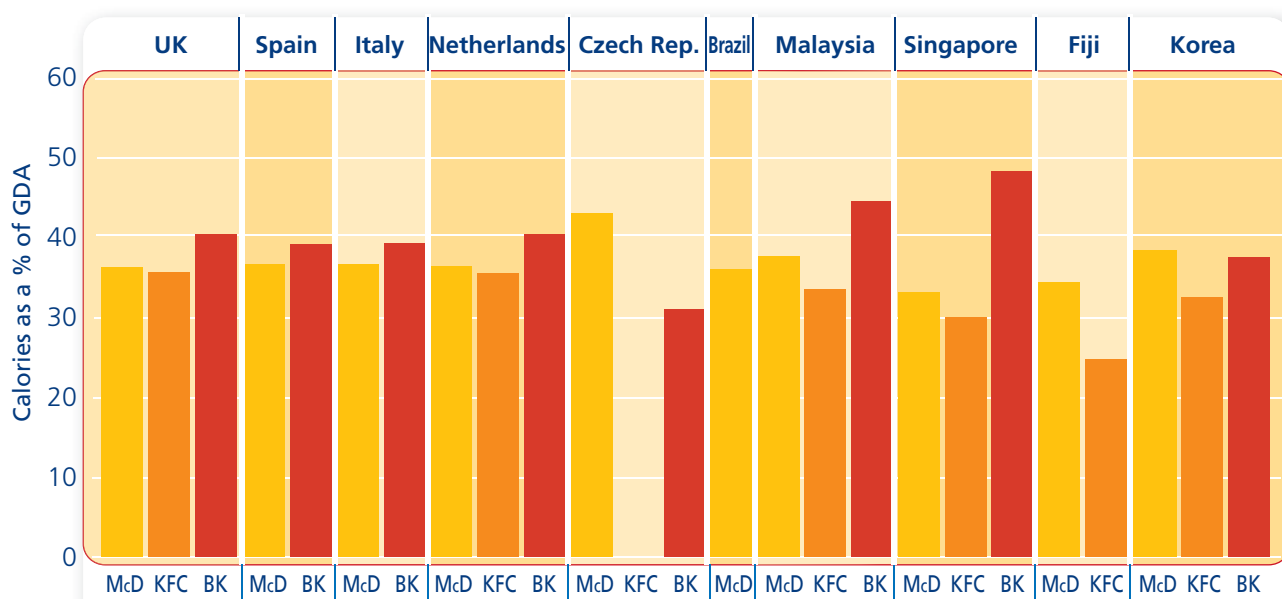
The meal accounts for more than... 70% of the GDA for fat for a girl aged between 11 and 14.

and salt when they start to eat meals from the regular menu – even though this may be as young as 11 or 12.

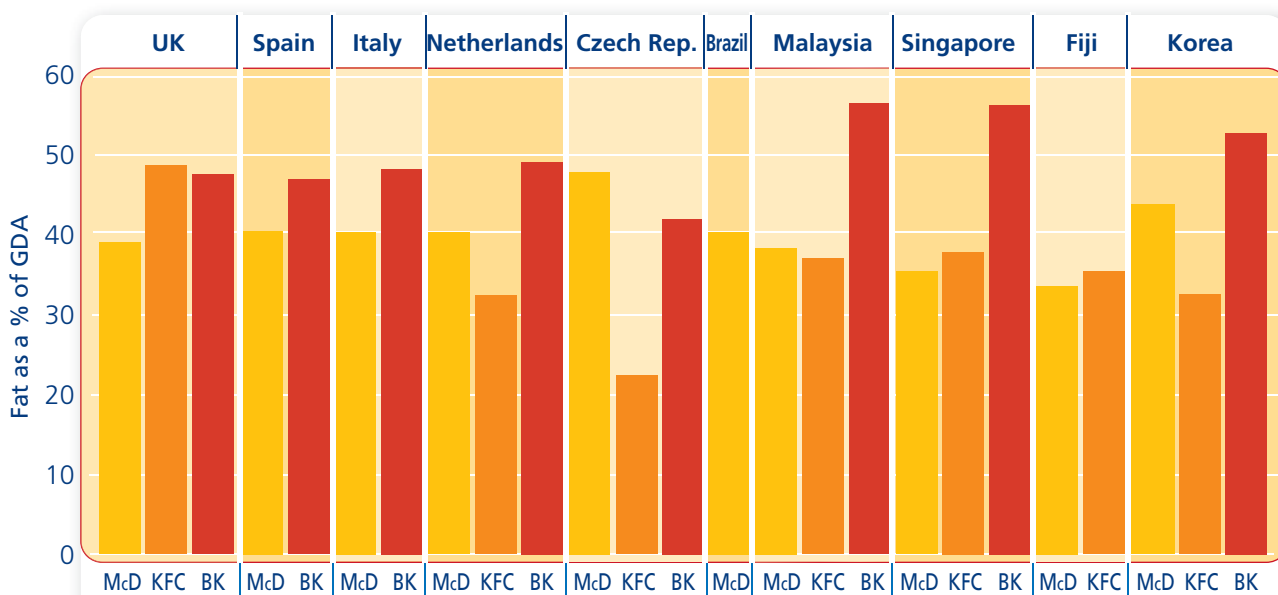
## Fast food signature meals: levels of calories, fat, sugar and salt

Gaps in the graph indicate that the information was not available from the fast food chain in that country.

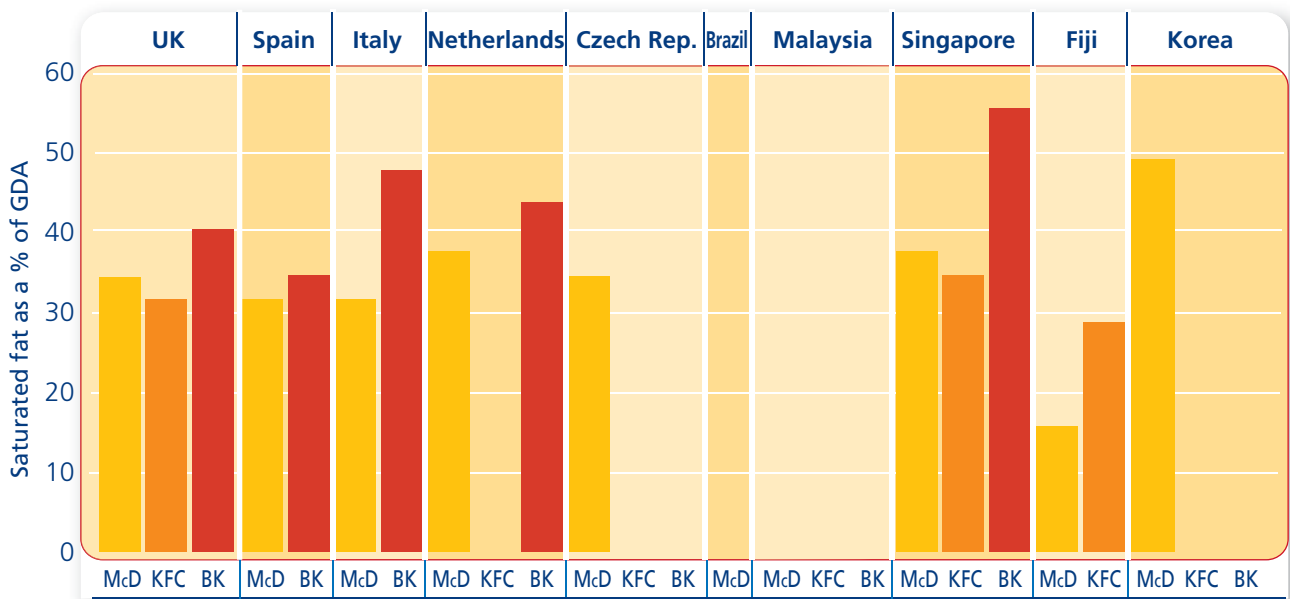
Graph 8: Energy as a % of GDA for a boy aged 15-18



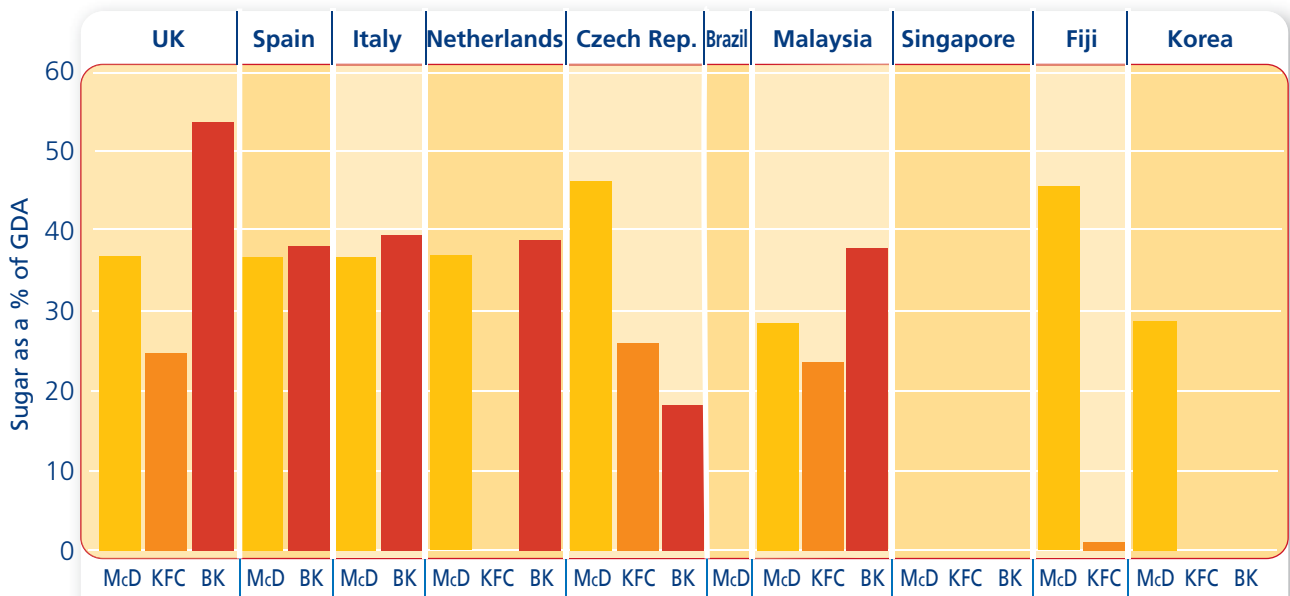
Graph 9: Fat as a % of GDA for a boy aged 15-18



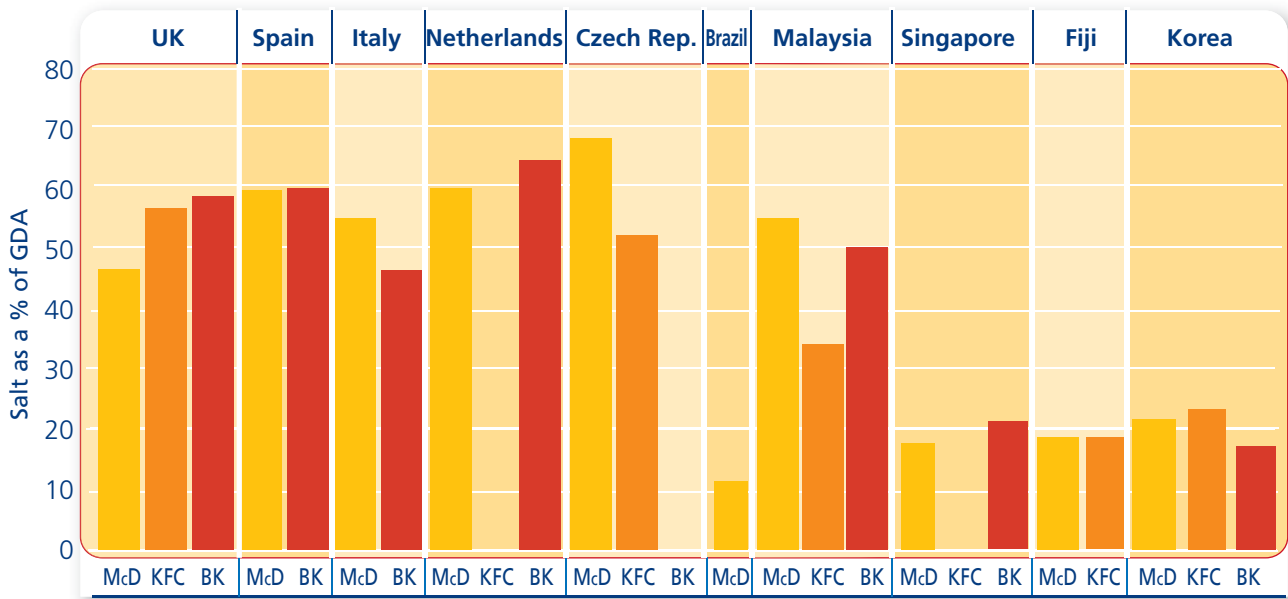
Graph 10: Saturated fat as % of GDA for a boy aged 15-18



Graph 11: Sugar as % of GDA for a boy aged 15-18



Graph 12: Salt as % of GDA for a boy aged 15-18





# Information to guide purchases

A simple step that fast food companies can take to assist consumers in eating more healthily is to clearly provide nutritional information about their products.

The availability of information is an important step in educating and informing consumers about what they are eating and could contribute to longer-term changes in diet. However this survey revealed considerable inconsistency between different countries and different fast food chains as to whether this information was made available, how it was made available and which nutrients were included.

Some chains did not provide any information to consumers in their restaurants and others did not include information about major nutrients such as sugar or salt.

The accessibility of information is also important, a recent study in the US revealed that just 4 out of 4,311 fast food customers observed the nutritional information that had been made available.<sup>6</sup>

Regulations requiring companies to make nutritional information available to consumers varies from country to country, however this should not prevent companies from offering clear nutritional information at the point at which consumers are making their choice.

Generally McDonald's appeared to be the most consistent in offering consumers nutritional information in their outlets and on their websites. Overall KFC appeared to offer consumers the least nutritional information.

## Information provided to consumers in different countries.

(Burger King – BK, Kentucky Fried Chicken – KFC, McDonald's – McD)

Argentina	BK did not provide any nutritional information in their outlets. McD provided information on the tray mat.
Brazil	McD provided information in their outlets. BK only provided information on their website. Neither included information on sugar.
Czech Republic	McD provided all the nutritional information in the outlet. BK and KFC only provided information on their websites and did not include information on saturated fat or salt.
Fiji	McD and BK provided information on calories, fat, sugar and salt.
India	McD and BK had some nutritional information missing from packaging and websites.
Italy	McD provided information on calories, fat, sugar and salt in their outlets and on their website. BK only provided this information on their website.

South Korea	McD provided information on calories, fat, sugar and salt in their outlets and on their website. BK and KFC did not provide information on saturated fat or sugar.
Malaysia	McD clearly provided information in its outlets, in BK and KFC it was difficult to find. McD, BK and KFC provided information on their websites. None of the chains provided information on saturated fat.
Netherlands	McD and KFC provided information on their websites and in their outlets. BK only provided information on their website. KFC did not provide information on saturated fat, sugar or salt.
Peru	McD provides nutritional information in its outlets. KFC and Burger King did not provide information on calories, fat, sugar or salt in their outlets.
Singapore	McD, BK and KFC did not provide information on sugar. KFC did not provide information on sugar or salt.
Spain	McD and BK provided information on calories, fat, sugar and salt. KFC did not provide any nutritional information.
UK	McD, BK, KFC all provided information on calories, fat, sugar and salt.

→ **Proteínas**

Proporcionan al organismo la materia prima necesaria y esencial para reparar y reconstruir tus músculos, órganos, piel y huesos. Fuentes de proteínas son la carne, pescado, pollo, productos lácteos, huevos y soja

→ **Grasas**

La grasa ayuda a que la comida tenga un buen sabor, proporciona energía, forma parte de cada una de las células de nuestro organismo, suministra ácidos grasos esenciales y ayuda a que tu organismo absorba las vitaminas A, D y E. Sin embargo, un consumo excesivo de grasa no es recomendable. Fuentes de grasa son por ejemplo, la mantequilla, carne, verduras y aceite de oliva, nueces, semillas y pescados grasos.

→ **Hidratos de Carbono**

Le proporcionan a tu cerebro y organismo la energía necesaria para realizar las actividades diarias. En esta categoría se incluyen el azúcar (que se encuentra en la fruta, las galletas y las bebidas) y las féculas (que se encuentran en las patatas, pan y pasta).



*A McDonald's Happy Meal box in Malaysia. Is the caption 'A Balanced Meal is a Happy Meal' an example of good practice or of persuading parents into believing the Happy Meal brand is good for their children?*

*A Spanish example of McDonald's own set of nutritional symbols which it features on its packaging. These are not intuitive and need further explanation which is available on the packaging or on the website.*



# Conclusions and recommendations

Under pressure from health campaigners and consumers, fast food companies appear to have made progress in reformulating their children's menus to reduce the amount of fat, sugar and salt. Whilst some products continue to have high levels of fat or sugar, on the whole the products tended to have low or medium levels of fat, sugar or salt according to the UK FSA Traffic Light labelling criteria used in this report. Many of the fast food outlets covered by this survey also offered 'healthier' options as part of the children's menu which gives parents and carers the opportunity to choose items for their children with lower levels of fat, sugar and salt.

However this should not be taken as a sign that fast food is now a healthy option. As this survey has shown, some fast food meals that are marketed to young children can contribute 40% to 60% of a child's GDA for fat, sugar or salt. And when children outgrow the children's menu and start to choose meals from the adult menu, levels of fat, sugar and salt can increase dramatically. Many of the fast food chains' signature meals were found to contain between 40 and 60% of a 15 to 18 year old boy's GDA for fat and salt, as well as significant levels of saturated fat and sugar, these levels are even higher for girls and for children aged between 11 and 14.

Whilst meals that contain such high levels of fat, sugar and salt may be acceptable when eaten as a main meal or as an occasional treat, for children that visit fast food chains regularly or who are consuming fast food products, or even meals, as a snack between main meals this could contribute towards a problem with overweight or obesity.

The survey conducted by CI's UK member organisation, Which?, showed that many children in the UK are visiting fast food chains more than once a week and consuming more than 40% of their GDA for fat, sugar and salt during their visit. The use of collectable gifts is just one example of how fast food chains may be encouraging regular visits.

Other studies support the fact that regular visits to fast food chains can be a cause for concern. In particular there have been a number of studies in the US that have shown that a school's proximity to fast food outlets can contribute to an increase in the incidence of overweight in children. For example researchers at Columbia University and the University of California Berkeley assessed the fitness levels of ninth graders in California schools located near fast-food retailers. Obesity rates were significantly higher in those schools a tenth of a mile or less from fast food outlets.<sup>7</sup>

## Marketing meals high in fat, sugar or salt

Whilst CI welcomes companies' efforts to reformulate products and offer healthier options it is a major concern that all the fast food companies covered by this survey continue to use marketing to promote meals to young children that can constitute such a high proportion of their GDA for fat, sugar and salt.

Whilst the companies are, in some cases, identifying healthier items to parents and carers, they continue to promote meals with relatively high levels of fat, sugar and salt to children. This potentially undermines parents' and carer's efforts to encourage children to eat healthier diets and misses an important opportunity to support healthy eating amongst children.

There is also a concern that marketing burgers, fries and fizzy drinks to young children – even when they are not high in fat, sugar or salt – may be creating a taste for these products in later life. James McNeal, a well-known children's marketing guru and the author of 'Kids As Customers', has said, "We have living proof of the long-lasting quality of early brand loyalties in the cradle-to-grave marketing at McDonald's, and how well it works. We start taking children in for their first and second birthdays, and on and on, and eventually they

have a great deal of preference for that brand. Children can carry that with them through a lifetime."<sup>8</sup>

As has been noted above, whilst children's fast food meals can contribute a relatively high proportion of a child's GDA, the adult menu contributes even more, with levels of salt and saturated fat particularly high.

## The need for an international code on the marketing of food to children

CI is calling for an international code on the marketing of food to children that would give support and guidance to national governments in how to respond to what is now recognised as an urgent health issue.

An international code would also provide a clear benchmark to guide food companies in the development of their marketing policies.

The Recommendations for an international code prepared by CI and the IOTF provide a model framework on how this can work. It would provide protection from advertising of products high in fat, sugar and/or salt for children up to 16 years old and would include:

- A ban on radio or TV adverts promoting unhealthy food between 06.00 and 21.00.
- No marketing of unhealthy food to children using new media (such as websites, social networking sites and text messaging).
- No promotion of unhealthy food in schools.
- No inclusion of free gifts, toys or collectable items, which appeal to children to promote unhealthy foods.
- No use of celebrities, cartoon characters, competitions or free gifts to market unhealthy food.

## Recommendations

CI believes that all children up to the age of 16 years old should be protected from marketing of unhealthy food and drink through a global standard based on the Recommendations prepared by CI and the IOTF.

In particular, the following marketing techniques should not be allowed to promote food high in fat, sugar and/or salt:

1. Advertising or promotion that directly appeals to children, including the:

- Use of celebrities
- Use of cartoon characters, including brand owned and licensed
- Inclusion of free gifts, toys or collectable items

- Inclusion of competitions, vouchers or games
- Shape or novelty value of the food or food packaging

2. Advertising or promotion in places children visit frequently, which includes:

- Nurseries, pre-school centres, schools and school grounds
- Children's clubs, centres, playgrounds and sports halls
- Family and child clinics and paediatric services

3. Advertising that targets parents or carers:

- No indirect advertising to parents or other adults caring for children such as other family members, child carers, teachers, health workers. This includes suggesting that a parent or adult who purchases such a food or beverage for a child is a better, more intelligent or a more generous parent or adult than one who does not do so, or that their child when fed these products will be more intelligent and gifted.

## Consumers International calls on:

### The World Health Organization

- To develop an international code to restrict the marketing of food to children based on the CI/IOTF Code.
- Report on and monitor compliance with the international Code.

### National governments

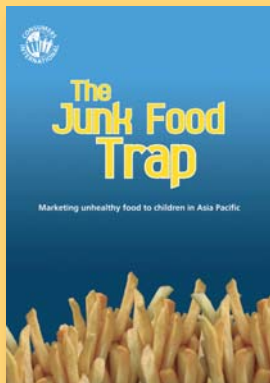
- To give their support to the development of an international code on the marketing of food to children.
- To implement national legislation based on the international Code to restrict the marketing of food to children.
- To monitor misleading labelling and implement a mandatory, coherent and transparent labelling system such as the traffic light system.

### Multinational food and beverage companies

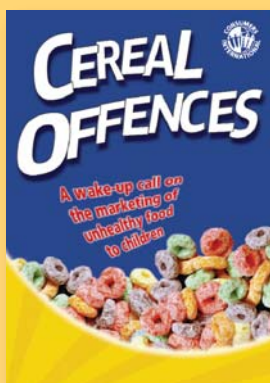
- To voluntarily comply with all the provisions in the CI Code.
- To adopt a consistent global approach and ensure that all internal policies on advertising and nutrition are implemented to the same standard in all countries.
- To use their creativity and breadth of marketing techniques to encourage children to make healthy food choices.

# Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> WHO fact sheet on obesity and overweight. <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs311/en/index.html>
- <sup>2</sup> [http://www.aboutMcDonald's.com/mcd/our\\_company.html](http://www.aboutMcDonald's.com/mcd/our_company.html)
- <sup>3</sup> <http://investor.bk.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=87140&p=irol-IRHome>
- <sup>4</sup> <http://www.yum.com/company/ourbrands.asp>
- <sup>5</sup> *Adage. Index to global marketers 2008 Edition.* [http://adage.com/datacenter/article?article\\_id=132901](http://adage.com/datacenter/article?article_id=132901)
- <sup>6</sup> Accessing Nutrition Information at Chain Restaurants: New Data. Rudd Centre for Food Policy & Obesity Yale University. <http://www.yaleruddcenter.org/resources/upload/docs/what/reports/RuddDataAccessingNutritionInfoNov08.pdf>
- <sup>7</sup> *The Effect of Fast Food Restaurants on Obesity.* Columbia University, University of California, Berkeley. February 2009
- <sup>8</sup> James U McNeal, *Kids as Customers: A Handbook of Marketing to Children*



**The Junk Food Trap**  
Marketing unhealthy food to children in Asia Pacific



**Cereal Offences**  
A wake-up call on the marketing of unhealthy food to children



**Left wanting more**  
Food company policies on marketing to children



**New media, same old tricks**  
A survey of the marketing of food to children on food company websites



Consumers International  
24 Highbury Crescent  
London N5 1RX, UK  
email: [consint@consint.org](mailto:consint@consint.org)  
[www.consumersinternational.org](http://www.consumersinternational.org)



# junk food GENERATION

The campaign to stop the marketing of unhealthy food to children

Find out more about Consumers International's  
campaign by visiting [www.junkfoodgeneration.org](http://www.junkfoodgeneration.org)

