

Obesity and Fast Food: Is it becoming a global phenomenon

About 60 million of the 307 million Americans are considered obese that is a whopping 20% of the population. In Canada, the news is not much better with more than 6 million of 33 million Canadian are obese. This is 18% of the Canadian population.

Scientists have been investigating the link between fast food and obesity for years. In 2007, researchers at the University of Alberta uncovered a strong relationship between access to fast food and obesity. So the easier it is to access fast food where you live the more likely it will be that you will be obese.

According to Harvard School of Public Health, the relationship is more complex than simply the amount of fat found in fast foods that lead to diseases such as obesity. There are certain fats often contained in fast foods and other processed foods we eat that is the root of the problem. It is the consumption of “special” fats such as trans-fatty acids that increase our risk for cardio vascular diseases often associated with obesity.

In response to these research findings fast food companies have introduced healthier foods to their menu offerings. Even manufacturers of process foods such as Frito-Lay have removed trans-fats from many of their popular offerings. Will this be enough to prevent obesity rates from rising in rapidly developing countries such as India and China? Consider that the allure of fast food restaurants such as McDonald’s remains hot, tasty and greasy foods. More than likely visitors to fast-food restaurants will be in search of the traditional fast food items and not salad.

Today, 96% of the population in India will eat at a fast food restaurant at least once per month. About 30% will eat at one of these restaurants are least 2x per week. Among those that eat at these fast food restaurants, 58% will order fries while 56% will order ice cream. A large fries can contain well over 500 calories. These are items that are not part of the healthier foods menu; rather they are the staples of the hot, tasty and greasy menu. Other risky menu items include Milkshakes; a single serving often contains well over 500 calories and a whopping 39% in India state that this is their favorite menu item.

Do fast food restaurants have a responsibility to its patrons? McDonald’s is preferred by 70% and considered the number-one fast food restaurant in India. Other brands such as Pizza Hut and KFC are liked by about half of fast food patrons. What is positive news for these restaurants but may be troubling for the world health organization is that 43% state that their consumption of fast food has increased in the past 12 months.

So why does this matter? Well let’s consider for a moment the population of a country the size of India which has 1,139,964,932 inhabitants. If these countries follow the North American trend then about 20% of its population will become obese. Using today’s data this means 228 Million will be obese. This represents 75% of the entire US population. Consider China with its 1,324,655,000 citizens, this means 265 Million will be obese using today’s population. The potential outcome could be half a billion obese individuals in these 2 countries alone. The strain on the health care system would be enormous and could conceivably lead to the collapse of these countries.

As globalization continues to connect East and West there are trends that will flow between these 2 areas of the world. It is important to understand the positives and negatives that result as the world shrinks and local trends become global ones as well.

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*Data Collected: October 2010 – OnResearch Fast Food Global Research Study.