Pinching Pennies with Cheap, Quick Eats?
Fast Food Could Actually Cost You More in the Long Run

When money is tight, it's easy to get drawn in by the words "99-cent menu," especially if you have a car full of hungry children.

But saving bucks at the fast-food drive-through can backfire on you and all those eager beavers.

How?

Fast foods that are high in fat, calories and sugar can have long-term consequences on health.

A study published in the April 2009 volume of *Obesity* reveals that one-third of fast-food purchases contain more than 1,000 calories. That's nearly *half* of what an average adult should consume in an entire day, depending on age and level of physical activity. (Check out the estimated calorie requirement chart, to the right, to see what that means for your children!)

Researchers believe the high calorie count of these purchases is due to a combination of the type of food preparation (i.e., fried), high-calorie/high-fat menu choices, and larger portion sizes.

More calories can translate into added weight if you and your family are not staying in energy balance by getting up and moving more. That's why you should check out the calories on the menu board, the restaurant's Web site, or any hard-copy handouts that restaurants offer, to determine how many are contained in the portion you're considering.

"Super-sized portions at restaurants have distorted our view of what a normal portion size looks like," said Karen Donato, S.M., coordinator of Overweight and Obesity Research Applications, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute. "Through our science-based ***We Can!***™ program,

Estimated Calorie Requirements

(In Kilocalories) for Each Gender and Age Group at Three Levels of Physical Activity[a]

This chart shows how many calories are recommended for both males and females in all age groups. The energy requirements also are broken down into levels of activity from sedentary to active. This should give you a sense of how many calories, ENERGY IN, your family members need.

Estimate Calorie Requirements

Estimated amounts of calories needed to maintain energy balance for various gender and age groups at three different levels of physical activity. The estimates are rounded to the nearest 200 calories and were determined using the Institute of Medicine equation.

		Activity Level[b,c,d]		
Gender	**Age (years)**	**Sedentary[b]**	**Moderately Active[c]**	**Active[d]**
Child	2–3	1,000	1,000–1,400[e]	1,000–1,400[e]
Female	4–8	1,200	1,400–1,600	1,400–1,800
	9–13	1,600	1,600–2,000	1,800–2,200
	14–18	1,800	2,000	2,400
	19–30	2,000	2,000–2,200	2,400
	31–50	1,800	2,000	2,200
	51+	1,600	1,800	2,000–2,200
Male	4–8	1,400	1,400–1,600	1,600–2,000
	9–13	1,800	1,800–2,200	2,000–2,600
	14–18	2,200	2,400–2,800	2,800–3,200
	19–30	2,400	2,600–2,800	3,000
	31–50	2,200	2,400–2,600	2,800–3,000
	51+	2,000	2,200–2,400	2,400–2,800

a These levels are based on Estimated Energy Requirements (EER) from the Institute of Medicine Dietary Reference Intakes macronutrients report, 2002, calculated by gender, age, and activity level for reference-sized individuals. "Reference size," as determined by IOM, is based on median height and weight for ages up to age 18 years of age and median height and weight for that height to give a BMI of 21.5 for adult females and 22.5 for adult males.

b Sedentary means a lifestyle that includes only the light physical activity associated with typical day-to-day life.

c Moderately active means a lifestyle that includes physical activity equivalent to walking about 1.5 to 3 miles per day at 3 to 4 miles per hour, in addition to the light physical activity associated with typical day-to-day life

d Active means a lifestyle that includes physical activity equivalent to walking more than 3 miles per day at 3 to 4 miles per hour, in addition to the light physical activity associated with typical day-to-day life.

e The calorie ranges shown are to accommodate needs of different ages within the group. For children and adolescents, more calories are needed at older ages. For adults, fewer calories are needed at older ages.

Source: HHS/USDA Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2005

we're not just trying to create awareness of the fact that portions have *doubled* in size over the last 20 years—we're working to help families eat right, be more physically active and spend less time in front of the screen so that their children can stay at a healthy weight."

We Can! (**W**ays to **E**nhance **C**hildren's **A**ctivities & **N**utrition) offers parents and caregivers of 8- to 13-year-olds tips, trainings and other tools—such as nutritious recipes, healthy cooking substitutions and a portion distortion quiz—to help them create a healthy lifestyle for the whole family. For these, a free parents' handbook and more, visit http://wecan.nhlbi.nih.gov or call 866-35-WECAN.

With nearly half of every U.S. food dollar being spent on food prepared *outside* the home, it's time for us to start thinking about what we're buying with those hard-earned dollars, so that we don't find ourselves stuck with a big *health bill*, later.