



IS AMERICA'S CHOICE YOUR FAMILY'S CHOICE?

Most American families eat with a certain degree of carelessness, despite the fact that obesity, healthy diets, chronic illness, and weight loss are heavily discussed and sought-after topics in this country. Obesity concerns, stressful and demanding lifestyles, and a failing economy should force families to take a closer look at their eating habits. Nevertheless, kids and adults in this country are more overweight, out of shape and sickly than ever before.

Our fast-paced, convenience-driven lifestyle has transformed the way most families eat into a culture that's almost completely reliant upon highly refined carbohydrates, processed meats, and scarce amounts of fresh fruits and vegetables. The way most of America eats, commonly referred to as the Standard American Diet (SAD), has negative and far-reaching implications for the health of today's modern family. The diet of most American families is full of hydrogenated oil (trans-fat), high-fructose corn syrup, sodium nitrate and monosodium glutamate (MSG)—far from anything resembling a healthy diet.

“One of the very nicest things about life
is the way we must regularly stop whatever it is
we are doing and devote our attention to eating.”

LUCIANO PAVAROTTI, FROM *PAVAROTTI: MY OWN STORY*

Although it seems the odds are stacked against adopting lifestyle habits that are geared toward eating healthier, understanding the key trends that dictate the poor eating choices of most American families is your best weapon for successfully navigating your family toward better choices. For that reason, in Chapter 3, we'll take a close look at three choices many families make that greatly contribute to unhealthy eating, and we'll help you recognize if your family has also fallen into a trap of eating what's cheap, fast and convenient. In case you find your family needs to

make some different choices, this chapter includes steps you can take *now* to get on the straight and narrow.

FOLLOWING THE HERD

None of us lives on an island. We are influenced by our environment and the habits of those closest to us more than we realize. So what one family member does has a huge impact on the habits and behaviors of other members of that family. In my natural food workshops, I often use the analogy of “herd behavior” to illustrate this point.

If you’re not familiar with the concept of herd behavior, here’s a quick explanation. Psychological and economic research has identified herd behavior in humans to explain the phenomenon of large numbers of people acting in the same way at the same time without planned action. Herd behavior is common during major events like stock market bubbles and street demonstrations, but it can also be seen in everyday decision-making, judgment, and opinion-forming, like whether to make a second trip to the buffet bar. My mom had a more practical way of explaining this behavior to my brother and me when we were growing up. When we were about to do something dumb just because one of our friends was doing it, she would ask us, “If everyone else jumps off a cliff, are you guys going to jump, too?” Each and every time she asked us that question it made us re-evaluate our actions and our ability to think for ourselves.

Years ago, when my diet included too much sugar, saturated fat, meat, and fried foods, I wasn’t thinking for myself but was merely following my “herd.” My family and friends ate this way, so I did, too. In my household, we ate a traditional Southern diet. Either chicken or beef was the focal point of the meal. Occasionally we had fish, but it was always fried. Vegetables—usually greens, potatoes, corn, beans, or cabbage—rounded out the meal. Vegetables were seasoned with butter, salt, and other seasonings. Meats were usually fried or baked. I never gave much thought to the immediate and long-term effects these habits could have on my health and the quality of my life. I was simply on autopilot.

Whenever I ate out, I tended to gravitate toward restaurants with a large buffet, like Golden Corral or Old Country Buffet because, after all, it was a better deal, right? I got in line just like everyone else and filled my plate as full as I could get it. Knowing how to pack a plate full of food without any spilling over on the buf-

fet bar or the floor actually requires skill! And even though my first plate of food was enough to feed two people, I *always* went back for seconds. Second helpings were instinctive to me because I had learned from my herd that it was a waste of money to pay for a buffet and make only one trip to the bar.

IT'S YOUR CHOICE

Rates of overweight and obesity have increased dramatically in the United States over the past 30 years. This epidemic weight gain is due in large part to current eating trends that proliferate poor food choices. In many American households, poor food choices have become accepted as normal eating habits. Our busy, overextended lifestyles are rapidly eroding the fabric of our families. We don't have enough time to plan, shop, and prepare meals at home, so junk food and takeout prevails. And since we aren't cooking many meals at home, we aren't eating meals together at home. Family members are scattered in different directions, grabbing what they can find to eat along the way. There are few discussions around the dinner table, despite the fact that research shows that teens who eat with their families are 40 percent more likely to talk to their parents about problems.

I asked numerous families, as well as conducted research, about the top behaviors that drive unhealthy eating habits in busy families (which seems to be *all* families in America). The top culprits that get so many families off-track include eating away from home, consuming large portion sizes (obtained when dining out), and unhealthy snacking. When parents are busy, tired and stressed, they often rely on restaurant or takeout meals or excessive snack foods to tie their families over. Take a moment to reflect on your family's lifestyle. What choices are you making about family meals?

Choice No. 1: Eating Away From Home

A busy schedule, two working parents, kids, pets, and social obligations are a recipe for a restaurant meal. Hectic lifestyles lead a large number of U.S. households toward meals that are fast, affordable, and quick, which typically means they're consuming highly processed, high-fat and low-fiber foods.

Now more than ever before, American families are spending more money on food eaten away from home. Research shows that the consumption of food outside the home has increased since the mid-20th century, with the rate of spending rising from 34 percent of the food budget in 1970 to 47 percent in the late 1990s. This par-

allels the increase in number of food-service establishments, which has almost doubled from 491,000 in 1972 to 878,000 in 2004. In other words, families don't have to look far to find sit-down and fast-food restaurants, cafes, or street vendors for their daily sustenance.

Unfortunately, the trend of eating out has not only swept across American households but transformed the way families eat across the globe. Countries such as China and Japan are becoming "Americanized" through the integration of fast-food and convenience foods into everyday diets. Today there are more than 30,000 McDonald's outlets worldwide, and half of them are outside U.S. borders. The growth of fast-food restaurants is soaring in these countries, and their citizens are falling prey to the taste, convenience, and popularity of calorie-dense, nutrient-poor American meals.

QUICK WINS TIPS

Plan, shop, and cook meals at home at least twice a week. Then gradually work your way up to cooking and eating at home at least four times per week.



Choice No. 2: Large Portion Sizes

One visible characteristic that makes restaurant dining so popular these days is the trend toward large portion sizes. Most sit-down and fast-food restaurants are able to provide consumers with a large amount of food for a very affordable price. Consumers view these offerings as a value and patronize establishments that offer a lot of food for their money. But when the health implications are considered, large portions don't look like such a good deal after all.

A number of factors contribute to the rising rates of adult and childhood obesity in this country, but the bottom line is we gain weight when we take in more calories than we burn. As I've stated before, when we gain weight, we put ourselves at risk for diet-related illnesses like high blood pressure, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and cancer.

In many cases, we eat too much because we're offered too much. Our food portions have expanded so much that very few people actually know what a standard serv-

ing size is. A huge misconception is that a serving is equal to the amount served. In many cases, this is far from the truth. Consider the Grilled Salmon Burger from Red Robin restaurant, which comes on a whole grain bun with bistro sauce, red onions, tomatoes and lettuce. Sounds healthy, right? Salmon is rich in omega-3 fatty acids, which are touted for heart health. Whole grains are a good source of fiber. Red onions, tomatoes, and lettuce are vegetables. So this burger should seemingly get an automatic thumbs up, right? Not exactly. According to TheDailyPlate.com, a free online source of calorie counts and nutrition facts for more than 600,000 foods, one Grilled Salmon Burger contains 806 calories and 52 grams of carbohydrates. If you eat the fries that typically come with the burger, add another 390 calories. This one order will net you nearly 1,200 calories in one sitting—definitely not healthy!

A recent study published in the *American Journal of Public Health* confirmed that a huge discrepancy exists between standard USDA and FDA portion sizes and actual marketplace servings. According to the study's findings, the largest discrepancy occurred in the cookie category, with a 700 percent difference between measured and standard portion sizes. Other foods tested included cooked pasta, steaks and bagels, which exceeded standards by 480 percent, 224 percent, and 195 percent, respectively.

Thus, eating more meals away from home coupled with larger food portions has created a perfect storm for obesity and its related diseases. Not only do large food portions provide too many calories, but the nature of the food itself—often high-salt and high-sugar—encourages people to eat more. Studies even show that restaurants use carefully designed tactics to get consumers to eat more.

turning the tables

A 2010 CNN report on restaurants' table turnover tricks found that restaurateurs do any of the following to encourage you to eat more and faster:

- Play loud music to make customers eat faster and drink more.
- Seat customers in the middle of the restaurant, surrounded by chaos.
- Use uncomfortable chairs.
- Display dessert trays in customers' view.
- Decorate dining areas with warm colors like red, orange and yellow to stimulate the desire to eat.



QUICK WINS TIPS

Compensate for eating larger portions at one meal by eating fewer calories during the rest of the day. You could also eat half your meal at one sitting and save the rest for later.



What do we typically do after consuming such large amounts of food? We sit. According to the National Center for Health Statistics' *2008 Chartbook on Trends in the Health of Americans*, only 30 percent of the U.S. population engages in regular leisure-time physical activity. There's no question: The way we eat and our inactive lifestyles weigh heavily on the growing trend toward overweight and obesity.

Choice No. 3: Unhealthy Snacking

Americans do a lot of snacking. According to a national consumer survey by Simmons Market Research Bureau, 25 percent of adults snack between meals. Wouldn't it be great if all that snacking was done sensibly? But the truth is, snacking isn't something we do well in this country.

One unhealthy habit that drives so many people to reach for snacks is lack of meal preparation. According to a recent survey conducted by the American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR), 1 in 8 Americans is skipping meals more often. According to recent surveys from market research firm Packaged Facts and The Calorie Control Council, an international association representing low-calorie and reduced-fat food and beverage manufacturers, 33 percent of Americans skip meals and graze on snack foods when they're on the go. And that's not all: The rate has increased significantly since 2004! Respondents stated lack of free time to prepare healthy, nutritious meals as the major factor that drives frequent snacking, totaling about 20 percent of their daily calories.

Unhealthy snacking wreaks havoc on your body and sets you up for a cycle of unhealthy eating. The most popular snack foods are carbohydrates—the refined kind—mainly chips, cookies, crackers, sodas, candy, and the like. These foods cause spikes in blood sugar, making you feel jittery, unfocused, and lethargic. Once your blood sugar dips, you'll feel cravings again, coupled with low energy. These bodily signals will send you running back for more food. You again reach for a carbohy-

drate-rich meal, such as fast food, and the cycle starts all over again. By the end of the day you've consumed way more calories than you can burn off.

Done responsibly, snacking can be part of a healthy diet. Eating a healthy snack is a great way to add more nourishing foods to your diet, like fruits and vegetables, plus snacks help you tame your hunger so you can eat sensibly at meal time. In fact, you should rely on snacks for at least two of your daily meals.

To keep your metabolism revved up, your mood stable, and your brain functioning at high capacity, experts recommend eating five to six small meals in place of three large meals. Most people are accustomed to eating three big meals each day, so you'll have to make a conscious effort to plan and eat smaller meals throughout your day. Let's clarify: Snacks aren't meals, so aim for healthy snacks that are no more than 200 or 250 total calories.

The population most at risk from poor snacking habits is our children. A recent study published in the journal *Health Affairs* found that frequent snacking accounts for more than 27 percent of most kids' daily calorie intake. The largest increase in snacking was seen in young kids ages 2 to 6, who consumed more than 182 calories each day from snacks.

QUICK WINS TIPS

- Offer your kids snacks on fun plates. Plates of different shapes, sizes and colors are appealing to younger kids.
- Use colorful plastic forks and spoons.
- Serve water in glasses with neon straws.



Why should we care? It's troubling for a number of reasons. First, many common snacks aren't very nutritious. Typical snacks for kids include cookies, chips, sugary cereals, snack bars such as Rice Krispies Treats and Pop-Tarts, and other highly refined carbohydrate sources. Second, these snack foods tend to be high in sugar, calories and fat. And finally, kids are developing poor eating habits that contribute to overweight and obesity. It's estimated that 70 percent of overweight and obese

kids will become overweight and obese adults. And weight gain isn't the only problem: Unhealthy snacking also increases risk for dental problems, such as cavities.

IMPACT ON LEARNING AND BEHAVIOR

Children have small stomachs that don't hold much food at one time, so those little tummies need to be refilled regularly. Smart snacks can contribute to children's overall nutritional well-being if they provide quality nutrition for good health and normal growth.

Kids eat snacks at school, at home, in the car, and practically everywhere they go. Make sure the snacks they eat are healthful by preparing and packaging them at home. Zip-lock bags and storage containers make transporting snacks to and from school easy. When your family is out and about, be sure to pack a lunch tote or small cooler with plenty of healthy beverages and snacks. This will ensure healthy options are available when your family gets hungry and will reduce your reliance on unhealthy convenience or fast foods.

QUICK WINS TIPS

- Select snack foods that satisfy hunger, supply the body with energy, and provide quality nutrients.
- Have tasty and nutritious snacks available for your kids to enjoy. Always strive to make the healthy choice the easy choice.
- Make snacks a part of your family's healthy diet by structuring snacks on a schedule.



THERE'S NO EXCUSE

Personal responsibility plays a huge role in your quality of health, but you can't ignore societal factors—such as education level, income, and the condition of the neighborhood environment—that have a great impact on your ability to make good food choices and, ultimately, manage your health. Although not everyone has access to the highest-quality food, each of us is empowered to make small, simple changes in our food choices that will have some measure of positive effect on our health. Remember our mantra: *Small changes matter and can lead to Quick Wins for your health.*

HEALTHY SNACKS

The Center for Science in the Public Interest, a consumer advocate for nutrition and health, food safety, and food alcohol policy, has useful guides on healthy snacks for home and on the go. Here are a few suggestions from its *Healthy School Snacks Guide*.

Fruits: Whole, Sliced, Cubed, Canned, Frozen, or Dried

Apples	Apricots	Bananas	Blackberries
Blueberries	Cantaloupe	Cherries	Grapefruit
Grapes	Honeydew Melon	Kiwis	Mandarin Oranges
Mangoes	Nectarines	Oranges	Peaches
Pears	Pineapple	Plums	Raspberries
Strawberries	Tangerines	Watermelon	Applesauce

Note: Ensure fruit cups and canned fruit are purchased in water, 100% fruit juice, or light syrup.

Vegetables: Whole, Sliced, Cubed, or Dried

Broccoli	Baby Carrots	Cauliflower	Celery Sticks
Cucumbers	Red Peppers	Green Peppers	Snap Peas
Snow Peas	String Beans	Cherry Tomatoes	Squash Slices
Zucchini Slices			

Whole Grains (100% Whole Wheat)

Pitas	English Muffins	Tortillas	Breakfast cereal
Crackers	Rice Cakes	Popcorn	Granola
Cereal Bars	Pretzels	Breadsticks	

Low-Fat Dairy

Natural cheese	Milk	Cottage Cheese	Eggs
Yogurt	Cream Cheese	Homemade Smoothies	

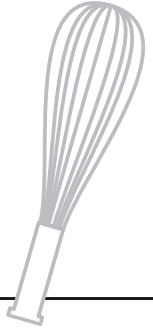
Beverages

Water	100% Fruit Juice	Soy and Rice Drinks	Seltzer
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Quick Wins are achievable, irrespective of your socio-economic status. Repeating your actions consistently and systematically will provide the momentum you need to steer your family away from obesity-related illnesses. In the next chapter, we'll tackle the four big health risks that could greatly impact your family's future if you don't make small changes *now* in the way you eat.

BELIEVE IT OR NOT

One slice of Sbarro's Stuffed Pepperoni Pizza contains 960 calories, 42g fat and 3,200mg sodium.



➤ food for thought ◀

- The Standard American Diet, rich in highly refined carbohydrates and processed meats but low on fruits and vegetables, doesn't have to be the norm for your family.
- Cooking and eating dinner together at home instills the value of good nutrition and family togetherness.