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More American Kids Eating Deep-Fried Fast Foods

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MONDAY, Oct. 3 (HealthDay News) -- The number and frequency of American children eating restaurant-served fried foods are climbing at an alarming rate, according to a new study of more than 14,000 adolescents.

Harvard researchers found the number of children who regularly ate meals outside the home more than doubled during the three years of the study, conducted from 1996 to 1999. This change in eating habits was associated with increasing weight gain in boys, plus restrictions in children's access to healthier foods.

Trends like these don't bode well for these youngster's adult lives, the researchers warned.

"Adolescence is a very risky time to develop poor eating habits. If you become overweight [at this time], it's very hard to lose the weight and much more likely to become overweight as an adult," said study author Dr. Elsie Taveras, director of a pediatric obesity-prevention program called One Step Ahead at Children's Hospital Boston.

Reporting in the October issue of *Pediatrics*, Taveras and her colleagues surveyed 14,355 children between the ages of 9 and 14, recording their height, weight, physical activity and frequency of consumption of fried food away from home.

At the beginning of the study, 3.5 percent of the girls and 6 percent of the boys reported eating four to seven servings of fried food weekly away from home, with the older children eating out more frequently than the younger children. At the end of the three years, the proportion of girls and boys who ate out more than four times a week had more than doubled, from 7.5 percent to 12.7 percent, respectively.

"The children more than doubled their consumption. These diet patterns are becoming more prevalent," she said.

Boys did tend to eat out more than girls -- perhaps due to boys' higher participation in competitive sports, which could lead to more visits to restaurants away from home, Taveras

speculated. However, both genders showed an overall increase in away-from-home eating, she said.

Furthermore, the overall body mass index (BMI) for boys who reported the least meals out was 19.0, while the BMI of boys who ate out most frequently was slightly higher, at 19.3 (for reference, statistical overweight beings at a BMI of 25, while obesity begins at 30). This difference isn't large, Taveras said, but it is worrisome because the weight can accumulate over time. Trends toward weight gain in girls did not reach statistical significance.

The Harvard expert said it was no surprise to find that eating fried foods away from home was related to weight gain -- "we know this in the back of our minds" -- but what was noteworthy was the adverse effect of these eating habits on the quality of the children's diets.

"We were surprised by the effect of eating fried foods away from home on diet quality in general. The types of food available in these environments mean less exposure to healthier foods, and if you eat these types of food frequently, you are less likely to have a diet of nutritional value," she said.

This means that children are eating a lot more fat, drinking more sugar-sweetened beverages and are less likely to be eating fruits and vegetables, or drinking low-fat milk, she said.

"This study underscores the importance of bringing the family back home to eat together," said dietitian Sue Moores, a spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association.

"People are not eating a lot of fried foods at home -- I don't know anybody who owns a deep-fat fryer," she said. That means people who gather round the family dinner table each night "tend to eat more healthy food," she said.

Taveras said that she encourages families to eat together at home, but she said she also recognizes the time pressures parents often face at the end of the day. So she said she works at her clinic to help moms and dads improve the family food choices they make whenever they do eat out. She said most parents are very responsive to this practical advice.

"You have to get through two barriers, cost and food preference. If the alterations you are asking them to make are comparable in price and not that different in taste, they are more likely to make the changes," she said.

Most fast-food restaurants do have healthier choices, she said, and parents can guide their children, for instance, to have a chicken salad and specify that the chicken be grilled rather than crispy-fried.

Taveras said her study highlights the importance of early intervention in this age group to help adolescents and their parents improve eating habits so that children will avoid obesity and the many health problems that are concurrent with being overweight.