

The Battalion Classified

Not all fast food bad, expert says

United Press International

NEW ORLEANS — "Fast food" does not necessarily translate "junk food," a nutrition researcher reports.

Barbara Shannon, an associate professor of nutrition at Pennsylvania State University, recently told the American Dietetic Association that fast food chains often provide healthy, wholesome meals, although she stopped well short of a blanket endorsement.

Shannon said trends toward fast food and increased eating among Americans pose serious questions for dietitians.

"I think that nutrition educators have not traditionally made restaurant dining as one of the sources of food and nutrition. Now we have to realize that eating out is a way of life," she said in an interview.

Eating at fast food restaurants — those with rapid, over-the-counter service — is approaching a volume of \$20 billion annually in the United States.

Some people rely on fast food restaurants for as many as 10 meals a week, Shannon's research has shown. And customers under the age of 35 choose a fast food place about 60 percent of the time when they eat out.

There are three key questions about fast food eating as it bears on people's health, Shannon said:

—How often do they eat out?
—How nutritious is the food offered?
—What do they choose from among the offerings?

"This business of going around and saying all fast food is junk is just not so," Shannon said. "There are many fast food items that are good foods. There are some that are not."

Asked which foods are the best, Shannon was pressed to give an answer.

Most sandwiches — hamburgers, cheeseburgers, "Big Macs," filets and so forth — meet good nutrition requirements, she said, though some have too many calories. And, she points out, "If a burger has tomato and lettuce on it, it's better from a nutrition standpoint than just a hamburger."

The least nutritional foods are easy to list.

"Colas — soft drinks — are the worst," she said. "They offer practically nothing but calories." Second worst are fruit pies, she said, though conceding, "I think they're delicious."

Shannon said she is encouraged by a trend toward more dining in fast food. Where a few years ago the term "fast food" evoked images of carhops and hamburgers, she said, it now covers a menu including Mexican food, fried chicken, pizza, salad bars, even Chinese and Japanese food in some areas.

The concept of fast food service is catching on in school lunch programs and Shannon views that trend with ambivalence.

"It's a plus that this fast food approach is at least reducing waste. They are improving the fast food menu. That's the plus. The negative side is that it's not teaching children to eat a variety of foods, to learn to eat other kinds."

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