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HEALTHY EATING – THE LONG-TERM HARMS OF FAST FOOD ON THE BODY

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Abstract: This article analyzes the importance of healthy eating for human health and the long-term negative effects of fast food products on the body. Fast food items are often high in calories, fats, sugar, and salt, which can lead to obesity, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and digestive system problems. The article also discusses the widespread consumption of fast food among young people, its impact on their health, and the need to foster a culture of healthy eating. The research findings aim to deepen the understanding of the risks fast food poses to the human body and to promote a healthy lifestyle.

Keywords: Fast food, healthy lifestyle, obesity, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cholesterol, hypertension, depression, chemical additives, eating habits.

Introduction

Nowadays, due to societal development, urbanization, and the acceleration of modern life, significant changes are occurring in eating habits. People often turn to fast food products that are quick to prepare, inexpensive, and have appealing taste. Although such foods provide short-term satiety, they contain many harmful substances. In particular, high-calorie fats, trans-fatty acids, excessive sugar, and salt disrupt the body's metabolic balance.

Long-term consumption of fast food is considered one of the main causes of diseases such as obesity, cardiovascular illnesses, diabetes, and fatty liver. In addition, it can lead to a slowdown in digestive system function, weakened immunity, and mental fatigue.

Healthy eating plays an important role in a person's life.Foods rich in vegetables, fruits, grains, and protein provide the body with essential vitamins and minerals, helping to ensure a long and active life. Therefore, raising awareness about the dangers of fast food and promoting a culture of healthy eating has become one of the most pressing issues today.

Fast food refers to a type of meal that is mass-produced for commercial purposes and prioritizes speed of service. This term typically applies to meals that are frozen, preheated, or pre-prepared in restaurants or food outlets and served to customers in packaged form for takeaway.

Later, the term "fast food" began to be used interchangeably with "junk food", which refers to all foods low in nutritional value. The phrase "junk food" was first used in 1972 by Michael Jacobson, the director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest (H. A. Abdulmumeen, A. N. Risikat, and A. R. Sururah,2012).

Fast food initially emerged as a commercial strategy designed to cater to the needs of people with busy lifestyles, including travelers, commuters, and workers who had limited time for traditional meals. These quick-service food options offered convenience, affordability, and accessibility, making them particularly appealing in urban environments and during long commutes.

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Over time, this approach to food consumption evolved into a global industry, driven by increasing demand for instant, ready-to-eat meals. Fast food establishments began to prioritize speed, mass production, and standardized menus to ensure consistency across various locations.

By the year 2018, the fast food industry had grown significantly in scale and influence, with its global market value estimated at around 570 billion US dollars. This remarkable growth reflects not only changing dietary habits but also the profound impact of globalization, advertising, and modern consumer culture on food choices around the world (Franchise Help,2018).

The quickest variant of fast food is comprised of pre-cooked meals that minimize customer waiting times to just a few seconds. Major fast food chains, such as McDonald's and Burger King, commonly utilize mass-produced and pre-prepared ingredients to streamline their operations. These components often include packaged bread, condiments, frozen meat patties, and vegetables that have been pre-washed or pre-cut. Despite this, certain items—such as meat products and French fries—are freshly cooked immediately before serving and then assembled according to the customer's order to ensure freshness.

A significant characteristic of many fast food items is their high content of saturated fats, sugars, salt, and calories (Hellesvig-Gaskell, Karen.2022). Numerous scientific studies have linked regular consumption of fast food to a heightened risk of several chronic health conditions, including cardiovascular diseases, colorectal cancer, obesity, elevated cholesterol levels, insulin resistance, and mental health disorders such as depression. Importantly, these correlations persist even after accounting for other lifestyle factors, underscoring a strong and independent relationship between fast food consumption and increased risks of serious illnesses and premature mortality (Pan, An; Malik, Hu, Frank B.2012).This evidence highlights the urgent need for public health interventions focused on dietary habits and the promotion of healthier food choices.

According to a report published in 2008, children born to mothers who consume junk food during pregnancy or breastfeeding are more likely to develop obesity (H. McGee,2006). A more recent report also emphasized that when pregnant women consume foods high in sugar and fat, their children have a higher likelihood of developing a preference for junk food. This is because high-fat and high-sugar foods affect the brain's "reward pathways" in the fetus, altering taste preferences toward such foods (Z. Y. Ong and B. S. Muhlhausler,2011).

The chemical substances found in fast food cause numerous harmful effects on the human body. Some of these effects are discussed below(T. E. Tuormaa,1994).

One of the most common harmful consequences of consuming fast food is obesity. Excessive consumption of junk food can lead to addiction. Various studies have shown that a high intake of salt in the diet can increase inflammation through IL-17, which may worsen autoimmune diseases (C. Wu et al.,2013).

Today, many foods and beverages are loaded with carbohydrates and calories. Regular consumption of carbohydrates can raise blood sugar levels, which may eventually lead to type 2 diabetes (K. H. Cheeseman and T. F. Slater,1991).

Excessive consumption of junk food can also contribute to cardiovascular diseases. High sodium intake increases the risk of kidney stones, kidney diseases, and stomach cancer.

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Furthermore, fast food consumption negatively affects the respiratory system and the central nervous system (Y. Ali Moustafa Elkhateeb,2017).

Additionally, regular consumption of such foods adversely impacts the skin and bones. In children, it can cause inflammatory rashes such as acne and eczema. Excessive sodium intake can also lead to the development of osteoporosis (D. D. Stevenson and R. A. Simon,1981).

Food dyes used in junk food give the products attractive colors and appearance. However, the chemical substances in these dyes often consist of by-products derived from coal tar and other harmful chemical compounds, which can contribute to the development of certain types of cancer (I. Young and J. Woodside,2001)

Excessive consumption of fast food can lead to early onset of hypertension, dyslipidemia, impaired glucose tolerance, and increased risk of heart disease. Additionally, fast food lacks essential micronutrients such as carotene, vitamins A and C, calcium, and magnesium, which can result in osteoporosis. Diets high in sugar can damage tooth enamel, while the high salt content in fast food raises the risks of high blood pressure, stroke, and kidney diseases.

Conclusion

Although fast food is widespread in people's daily lives today, its negative health consequences are very serious. The primary problem with fast food is its content of saturated fats, excessive amounts of salt and sugar, and high calories. These components contribute to obesity, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, elevated cholesterol levels, and various metabolic disorders. Moreover, fast food products contain very few beneficial nutrients such as vitamins and minerals, which are instead replaced by harmful chemical additives.

Long-term and regular consumption of fast food weakens the immune system, negatively affects the nervous and respiratory systems, and research has even noted links to mental depression and mood disorders. When children and adolescents consume fast food, their healthy development is impaired, and obesity and excessive weight begin to develop from an early age.

Therefore, to support a healthy lifestyle, it is important to avoid fast food as much as possible and instead adopt a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, natural products, and balanced nutrition. Only by doing so can society raise a healthy new generation.

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