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Who's to blame?

By TEDDY SNELL



The movie “Supersize Me” brought to light that eating fast food on a daily basis can kill you.

As a result, many restaurants scrambled to alter their menu offerings, and have de-emphasized advertising their giant meals and have begun highlighting healthy alternatives.

According to numerous scientific studies, Americans are held tightly in the grasp of an obesity epidemic, and health departments are urging - even begging - the populace to watch not only what they eat, but how much they eat in any given sitting.

With all the focus being directed towards healthier alternatives, are people actually taking heed?

Maybe, maybe not. Carol McKiel, coordinator for the Cherokee County Health Coalition, indicated Americans have almost doubled the amount of times they eat out in the past 20 years.

“At the same time, restaurants have increased the portion sizes of the food we are eating,” said McKiel. “In some cases, the amount of food on our plates in restaurants has doubled. Unfortunately, we are eating all the food on our plates and not splitting meals or putting half in to-go boxes to be used for a meal the next day.”

According to McKiel, an average person should be eating about 2,000 calories and 60 fat grams a day.

“But it is often difficult to know how many calories and how much fat are in the different foods we eat at restaurants,” said McKiel. “Some of the foods are extremely high in calories and fat; for example, a double cheeseburger, large fry and milkshake is about 1,600 calories and 70 grams of fat.”

This type of lunch or dinner isn't so bad when eaten a couple of times a month, but it's very unhealthy if eaten a couple of times a week and deadly if eaten daily, as indicated by “Supersize Me.”

“Unfortunately, we are eating too many of these high-calorie and high-fat foods all during the week, and this is leading to excess weight gain,” said McKiel. “Being overweight can cause us to feel poorly and can also lead to a number of diseases, such as diabetes and cancer. A diet high in calories and fat is literally killing us.”

According to the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, recent studies have examined the effect of portion size on amount of food consumed in an attempt to prove the obesity theory, with conflicting results.

One study, in which experimenters served men increasing portions of macaroni and cheese, found that participants ate more food when portions were increased by as little as 27 percent. Although intake increased with the amount of food presented, ratings of fullness after the meal were not affected. This suggests that portion size may influence hunger and the feeling of satisfaction after a meal, according to researchers, because as more food was offered, it took longer for participants to reach satisfaction.

In addition to portion sizes, the serving method may play a large part in food intake. In studies where people ate more with greater portion sizes, people were given predetermined amounts of food, which they ate directly from the plate it was served on. On the other hand, when people themselves determined the amount of food on their plates, their intake was constant.

Another study indicated that when young children were allowed to choose their portion sizes, they ate about 25 percent more. It's unclear why there is such disparity between adults and children, other than to say children are more often encouraged to "clean their plates," than adults.

McKiel offered several suggestions when eating out.

"First, go to restaurants that list the calories and fat for the different food items on their menus," said McKiel. "Six local restaurants are participating in the Healthy Restaurant program have identified menu items that fall within a healthy calorie and fat gram range, but there are chain restaurants that also list this information. This helps you make informed decisions about the food you eat."

Local eateries participating in the program include Vidalia's, Iguana Cafe, Town Branch Eatery, Katfish Kitchen, Echota House and Restaurant of the Cherokees.

"Second, try eating less when eating out," said McKiel. "Put half your order in a to-go box before you start eating, or split the meal with someone. You will probably be surprised that just eating half will still satisfy your hunger."

Finally, McKiel recommends selecting menu items that are lower in calories and fat.

"Eat fewer deep-fried foods," she said. "Instead, ask for the broiled chicken or grilled food. Deep-fried foods, such as french fries or fried chicken, are high in trans fats, which have been found to be unhealthy."