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## **Are fast-food restaurants keeping their promises to offer healthier kids' meals? New study finds the answer is "sometimes."**

*None of the chains examined listed sugary soda and other soft drinks on kids' meal menus on their websites, but some of the chains' restaurant locations continue to list them on menu boards and offer them with kids' meal orders*

**Hartford, Conn.** – A new study evaluating major U.S. fast-food restaurant chains' pledges to offer healthier kids' meal drinks and sides shows inconsistent implementation at the chains' individual restaurant locations. Moreover, promotion of healthier items varied widely between the chains examined, according to a new report from the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at the University of Connecticut.

"Since 2013, the fast-food restaurants we examined have made changes to offer and promote healthier drink and side options for kids' meals. Still, about one-third of menu boards inside the restaurants we examined continued to list sugary soda and other soft drinks as an option for kids' meals. And perhaps more importantly, there was wide variation in whether customers were offered the healthier options when they ordered a kids' meal," said Jennifer Harris, Director of Marketing Initiatives for the UConn Rudd Center, and lead author of the report.

"Some personnel at all the chains examined continued to give customers a cup for a soft drink and/or french fries with kids' meal orders without offering any healthier options, despite the pledges," Harris said.

The new study evaluated implementation of pledges made since 2013 by McDonald's, Burger King, Subway, Wendy's, KFC, and Dairy Queen to remove sugar-sweetened fountain drinks from their menu boards and/or offer healthier drinks and sides with kids' meals.

Researchers analyzed kids' meal drink and side items listed on the chains' websites; kids' meal drink and side items listed and pictured on menu boards and on signs at a sample of individual restaurants; and drinks and sides offered by individual restaurant personnel when mystery shoppers ordered kids' meals. To assess changes over time, results were compared to data collected in 2010 and 2013.

Healthier drinks and sides included 100 percent juice, low-fat milk, and water, non-fried fruits and vegetables, and other options. Unhealthy options included sugar-sweetened soda and other fountain drinks, fried potatoes, and desserts.

Key results of the study include:

- In 2016, none of the restaurant chains examined listed sugary soda and other soft drinks on the kids' meal menus posted on their websites, a notable improvement from 2013 when all restaurants except Subway listed them. In addition, all chains listed at least one healthier kids' meal drink, such as low-fat plain milk, 100% juice, and/or water.
- All chains also listed at least one healthier side item on their websites' kids' meal menus, including fresh fruit, applesauce, and/or yogurt. However, all restaurants except Subway continued to list unhealthy kids' meal side items too, such as french fries or desserts, on their websites' kids' meal menus.
- Individual restaurants at all chains consistently listed healthier drink and side options on their kids' meal menu boards inside restaurants in 2016. However, despite pledges to remove sugary soda and other soft drinks from kids' meal menus, approximately one-third or more of restaurants visited at each chain also continued to list these drinks for kids' meals on menu boards.
- Some personnel at all restaurant chains continued to only offer sugary soda and other soft drink options with kids' meal orders, ranging from 16 percent to 18 percent of orders at McDonald's, Burger King, and Subway, to 44 percent of orders at KFC and Wendy's, and 67 percent of Dairy Queen orders.

Just 8 percent of restaurant personnel at Burger King and 22 percent at Wendy's offered the restaurants' healthier kids' meal side options, compared with 100 percent of orders at McDonald's. However, at all three restaurants, the majority of kids' meal orders automatically received french fries – ranging from 68 percent at McDonald's (the chain's kids' meals come with two side items) to 90 percent at Burger King.

“Our evaluation found that restaurants have increased the number of healthier side and drink options available with kids' meals, but customers often received sugary soda and other soft drinks and/or french fries automatically when they ordered a kids' meal. When restaurant personnel suggested the healthier options, they typically offered them as one of several choices, often together with unhealthy options,” Harris said. “Restaurant chains should do more to actively encourage customers to purchase their healthier kids' meal drinks and sides at the point-of-sale. Offering healthy drinks and sides as the default with kids' meals would make them the easiest choice for parents and help improve the nutrition quality of fast food consumed by children.”

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Report co-authors include Maia Hyary, Nicole Seymour and Yoon-Young Choi of the UConn Rudd Center.

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**About the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity**

The Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at the University of Connecticut is a distinguished multi-disciplinary policy research center dedicated to promoting solutions to childhood obesity, poor diet, and weight bias through research and policy. The Rudd Center is a leader in building broad-based consensus to change diet and activity patterns by conducting research and educating policy makers and the public. For more information, visit [www.uconnruddcenter.org](http://www.uconnruddcenter.org) or follow us on Twitter at [www.twitter.com/uconnruddcenter](https://www.twitter.com/uconnruddcenter) or on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/uconnruddcenter](https://www.facebook.com/uconnruddcenter).