

Fast Food Chains Score ‘Abysmally Low’ on Nutrition, High on Calories: Analysis

New testing by Moms Across America shows typical fast food items sold at top U.S. chains contain negligible levels of key vitamins and minerals but are high in calories. Experts warn this is fueling “skyrocketing” health issues from childhood obesity to mental illness, while advocates urge more funding for organic school meals.

By Suzanne Burdick, Ph.D.

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Editor's note: *This is the last in a four-part series covering Moms Across America's testing results for the top U.S. fast food restaurants. Part 1 reported on antibiotics and hormones. Part 2 reported on pesticides. Part 3 reported on heavy metals.*

Many items at popular fast food restaurants have “abysmally low” levels of key nutrients but high levels of calories, according to a Moms Across America’s (MAA) report on the nutritional and caloric content of foods sold by top fast food chains in the U.S.

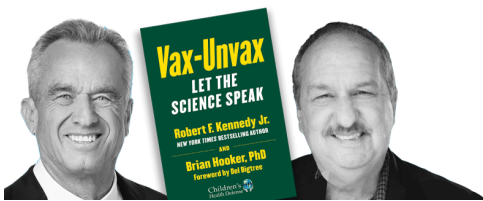
MAA tested for 12 key minerals, six key vitamins and caloric content in popular menu items from chains such as In-N-Out Burger, Taco Bell, McDonald’s, Chick-Fil-A, Wendy’s and others.

“Eighty-five million Americans eat fast food every day,” MAA said. “Fast food companies often supply a significant portion of the 30 million school meals served to our children each day.”

Commenting on test results, nutritional therapist Jillian Burne said in a press release, “It’s not just that these foods lack nutrients, either, it’s often the type of nutrients that appear to be lacking.”

For example, none of the samples tested contained detectable levels of vitamins B12 and B9 (folate). Burne said B vitamins “provide methylation and detoxification support” and that “deficiencies often lead to anxiety, depression or mental illness.”

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Dr. Michelle Perro, a pediatrician with more than 40 years of experience, agreed. She pointed out that folate is one of the essential B vitamins needed “to synthesize DNA/immune function/nervous system function.”

Perro is the CEO of GMO Science and author of “What’s Making Our Children Sick?: How Industrial Food Is Causing an Epidemic of Chronic Illness, and What Parents (and Doctors) Can Do About It.” She told The Defender:

“The fact that the fast foods contained zero B12 and B9 — which should have been adequate because of the meat, cheese and eggs tested — is extremely concerning.”

Vitamin B12 is “extremely important for the nervous system, issues regarding cognition, energy, digestion, cardiac health, etc.,” she said.

Poor quality food and ‘skyrocketing’ mental, physical health crises

MAA undertook the testing “out of concern for America’s skyrocketing mental and physical health crisis.” The nonprofit said:

“The quality of the food, including the contamination of agrochemicals and lack of nutrients due to toxic chemical inputs, contributes to our mental and physical health issues.

“One in five Americans have a mental illness, and 54% of our children have a chronic health issue.”

MAA representatives and experts, including Perro, urged policymakers at an Oct. 17 congressional briefing to support measures that would put organic, non-toxic food on kids’ lunch trays.

Low vitamin, mineral content ‘not surprising’

The nonprofit independent lab Health Research Institute (HRI) conducted the testing.

For the minerals testing, HRI looked at multiple samples of two different items sold by the U.S.’ 20 top-selling fast food restaurants, plus California’s In-N-Out Burger.

Though In-N-Out Burger is ranked no. 33, MAA’s board, based primarily in California, insisted the chain be included to test the claim that it offers some of the “healthiest” fast food.

For the vitamins and calories testing, HRI examined multiple samples of a single item sold by each of the restaurants.

John Fagan, Ph.D., HRI’s chief scientist and CEO, told The Defender he found it most noteworthy that the levels of “important micronutrients” in the samples were “very, very low,” especially the B vitamins.

Among the foods tested, Taco Bell’s Beef Taco Supreme had the highest level of vitamin B6 at .025 milligrams (mg) per 100 grams (g).

One taco is three ounces (oz.) or roughly 85 g, so it has only .02125 mg of vitamin B6.

This amount is negligible considering kids ages 4 and older are supposed to get 1.7 mg of vitamin B6 a day, according to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

A child would need to consume 80 Beef Taco Supremes each day to meet the FDA’s dietary intake guideline.

Additionally, MAA noted that the mineral content of the fast food tested was “clearly lower” than needed to meet the recommended daily requirements of calcium, potassium, manganese, copper, zinc and iron.

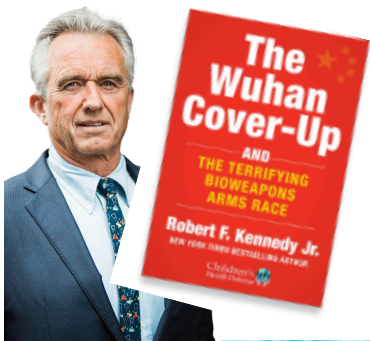
“This is not surprising because these are all highly processed foods and what processing does is take away the micronutrients,” Fagan said.

McDonald’s Breakfast Egg Sausage and Cheese Sandwich, Chick-Fil-A’s chicken nuggets, Wendy’s Cheese Burger, the Dunkin’ breakfast sandwich with sausage, egg and cheese, KFC’s fried chicken breasts, Jack in the Box’s fries, and Sonic Drive-In’s fries all had no detectable levels of manganese.

The rest of the samples contained only .01 to .02 mg of manganese per gram of serving, while the FDA recommends kids eat 2.3 mg of manganese every day.

Burger King’s 8 oz. Impossible Burger had roughly 2.65 mg of magnesium while the FDA says active kids need 420 mg of magnesium a day.

McDonald’s Breakfast Egg Sausage and Cheese Sandwich had the lowest magnesium level among the samples with just over .66 mg per 5.33 oz. sandwich.



“The Wuhan Cover-Up” by Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

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Empty calories major contributor to childhood obesity, diabetes

Meanwhile, many of the fast foods tested supplied a large portion of the FDA’s daily recommended caloric intake for children.

For instance, a 7.3 oz. Dunkin’ breakfast sandwich with sausage, egg and cheese had roughly 650 calories.

McDonald’s Big Mac, weighing 7.6 oz., had around 584 calories.

In all the samples, the amount of calories from carbohydrates exceeded the number of calories from proteins or fats.

Although not surprising, these results are “especially disturbing” since fast food chains sometimes supply kids’ lunches in public schools, Fagan said.

“We have to remember,” he said, “that for many children — about 30% of the population — the school lunches are the main meal of the day. Therefore, they are not going to get their nutrition somewhere else.”

If school lunches are mostly providing kids with “empty calories,” he said, children will finish eating the meal and still feel hungry “because they’re not getting the micronutrients that they need to satisfy all their physiological needs.”

Fagan added, “So what do they do? They eat more of this stuff. And this is one of the major contributors to the childhood obesity and diabetes epidemics in America.”

School lunch and breakfast programs: a nearly \$30 billion business

Fagan said, “There are billions of dollars that the federal government puts into this school lunch program that are all being shunted to these big companies that make empty-calorie meals.”

The federal government in 2022 spent roughly \$29.5 billion on its school lunch and breakfast program. Newer figures are not yet available.

Realistically, very little of that money goes to buying organic food, a spokesperson for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) told The Defender.

The USDA does not ban organic food in the school lunch program — but it doesn’t provide enough funding to schools to make up the difference in cost between buying organic and non-organic, according to the spokesperson.

“Organic foods cost more, so a school would most likely have to pay extra out of pocket to make up the difference of USDA school meal reimbursements,” he said.

Sen. Martin Heinrich (D-N.M.) on Oct. 19 introduced the Healthy Meals Help Kids Learn Act of 2023 that, if passed, would increase the federal reimbursement rates of school meals by adding an extra 45 cents per lunch served and 28 cents per breakfast served.

“Higher reimbursement rates would allow schools to source more healthy, regenerative organic options that are often unaffordable with current funding limitations,” said MAA board member Kelly Ryerson of Glyphosate Facts.

USDA commits \$300 million to help farmers transition to organic

The USDA in June 2022 committed to spend \$300 million to help farmers transition to organic farming practices.

It is unclear how many of these farmers are suppliers for school meals, but presumably, this, too, is a step in the right direction, Ryerson said.

Fagan said the USDA should go further by setting standards “that will exclude pesticide-laced fruits and vegetables” and by bolstering the government’s Farm to School Program.

“That will also elevate the levels of vitamins in the fruits and vegetables because fresh local produce has higher vitamin levels,” he said.

The USDA spokesperson said the USDA has taken steps to “support local purchasing” including awarding \$10.7 million to grantees in the Farm to School Program.





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The USDA also provided nearly \$30 million for the Healthy Meals Incentives Initiative to incentivize schools to cook from scratch with locally sourced foods.

Moreover, the USDA on Oct. 30 announced it will give more than \$32 million in grants to strengthen local food systems, including schools.

In August, the USDA said it would give \$30 million to help schools buy kitchen equipment.

Fagan said such changes in schools' kitchens are needed as many are only equipped with warming ovens, rather than real cooking equipment like blenders, cutting boards, mixers, stoves and ovens for preparing local ingredients.

He said:

"We need to have real kitchens in the schools and we need to have the schools enabled to access and use local organic vegetables and fruits.

"Then the students will have real food to eat and safe food because it won't have the pesticides and the heavy metals."

We need 'proper oversight' of what foods go on kids' lunch trays

Still, the problem of allowing fast food chains and other companies that sell highly processed foods to schools — such as Kraft, which sells its "Lunchables" — needs to be squarely addressed, Fagan said.

"Many of the companies that schools contract with to provide school meals use cheap ingredients" that "pump up their profit margins" while only providing "empty calories, failing miserably to provide key micronutrients," he said.

"It would be great if the USDA would prohibit schools from contracting with fast food chains as suppliers," he added.

There needs to be "proper oversight" from the U.S. government that ensures that money is spent on school foods that are rich in both macro- and micronutrients, Fagan said. "Until that happens, our children's health and fitness will continue to suffer."

SUGGEST A CORRECTION



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Suzanne Burdick, Ph.D., is a reporter and researcher for The Defender based in Fairfield, Iowa.

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3 months ago edited



I have gotten several emails from different sites recently about how did people eat what they did, etc, butter, meat and even sugar in the 1950 but still stayed mostly slim. I was b. in 1954 and I know for a fact we ate real food then. I grew up on a livestock farm where we had chickens, and eggs, beef, dairy, pork and orchards and a huge garden. We made our own butter and ice cream treats. We even drank RAW MILK
OMG! Mom canned and froze to eat all winter. I never even went to a sit down restaurant until I was in high school and as a once a year "treat" we were allowed to eat at McDonalds. (No longer a treat. Haven't drove the lanes in about 20 years!) As our family were farmers with much livestock, we never took an extended vacation but did do day trips with a packed lunch. That's how obesity didn't happen then., I went to a county school and honestly I don't remember one fat kid and also never even heard thing like diabetes, dementia or autism. I continue with same diet today and I still wear the same size I did in high school. What is so hard about understanding "garbage in, garbage out" and when are people going to take some control over their own bodies. No wonder the pill for

and ill and vax for everything has been able to take control of peoples lack of common sense. Hard to feel sorry for people that just won't learn anything, :(

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SHENZI

3 months ago edited

Well that's a huge DUH.
Junk food is not food. It's just junk.
AVOID.
All Americans deserve to have REAL FOOD that NOURISHES.
What passes for food in the richest country in the developed world is an abomination. Particularly targeted at America's poor. Junk "food" has been normalized in America by corporate greed which cares nothing about the health and well-being of our citizen and it feeds very conveniently into Big pHARM who then profit from the diseases caused later by this horrific diet.

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Chad

3 months ago

This scores like 150/5 on the 'uh duh' scale.

2 0 Reply • Share ›



Defiant

3 months ago

BREAKING NEWS FROM THE DEFENDER...FAST FOOD IS BAD FOR YOU!!!!

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cusfo

3 months ago

The article leans very heavily on the implied notion that school children should be getting their 'daily nutrition amounts' from just one meal a day. Very weak argument! I am doubting the claim that most of them are not getting breakfast and/or dinner meals that are nutritional. I suggest they solve the 'supposed' problem by providing all school children with a one-a-day multi-vitamin supplement.

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Gary Brown

3 months ago

Food deserts in America are linked to zoning laws and no fresh vegetables.

Jun 7, 2021 Excellent short talk from Dr. Unwin, explaining how anyone can fix their obesity, T2 diabetes etc. issues - using Real Food alone!

We invited David and Jen to our "Farm Food Fitness" group meeting in Ireland - and wow did they deliver the goods.

