

Summary

In the following report, fast food refers to standardised meals, which are offered in a limited range, ready to consume and can be quickly prepared. This definition wittingly excludes any qualitative evaluation of fast food because fast food, as such, is neither healthy nor unhealthy. *The Swiss Society for Nutrition* in this sense speaks of healthy or unhealthy *eating habits*, thereby making it clear that any food can be a component of a balanced diet according to the principle of the food pyramid, provided that it is consumed in the correct amount. In order to do justice to this aspect, the present report uses the synonymous terms "*quick meals*" and "*quick service food*".

The purpose of this report is to present the currently known facts about the effects of the regular consumption of quick meals on the health of young people. Based on this, in a second step, meaningful measures are formulated which, over the long-term, will contribute to improving the eating habits of this sector of the population.

Fast food has a bad reputation. However, the general classification of this kind of food as unbalanced is inappropriate from a scientific point of view because the range on offer is very broad nowadays and the nutritional quality of the individual items available varies greatly. A classic *hamburger* provides approximately 1.1 MJ or 265 kcal per portion and, taken in isolation, provides a relatively balanced energy distribution. Proteins provide 21% of the energy content, fats 35% and carbohydrates 45%. What is crucial, however, is what else is consumed with the hamburger (chips or salad; a Cola beverage or mineral water; ice cream or fruit; etc). In addition, certain quick meals can vary considerably in nutritional value depending upon how and with what ingredients they are prepared. In the present report, this is illustrated by the example of the *Pizza Margherita* which, in one case (that probably represents the average *Pizza Margherita*) provides 1.0 MJ or 230 kcal and 6 g of fat per portion while, in another case it provides 3.6 MJ or 850 kcal and 39 g of fat per portion! The present report merely touches on the micro-nutrient content of quick meals due to the lack of data, but it can be assumed that the contents lie at the lower end of the recommendations, since most classic quick meals do not include full-grain products, vegetable- or fruit-components.

Various studies – mainly from the USA – show that regular eating out and regular consumption of quick meals are related to health risk factors such as overweight. On one hand, the regular consumption of energy-dense food – and this also includes classic quick meals – leads to an increase in daily energy and fat intake while, on the other, the frequent consumption of quick meals is related to general behavioural patterns that are detrimental to health. Furthermore, in the context of the obesity problem, the sizes of portions in the catering and restaurant trade, which can be shown to have increased in the recent decades, also continue to be discussed. Finally, we should not fail to consider the soft drinks often consumed with quick meals. A representative study showed that, in Switzerland, 60-76% of young people consume such beverages at least twice a week.

However, there is still no proof of a causal relationship between these various health factors. The obesity epidemic can no more be attributed to the consumption of quick meals or soft drinks than it can to any other groups of foods or beverages taken in isolation. Convincing scientific evidence in connection with the risk of obesity exists only in relation to a sedentary lifestyle and a high intake of energy-dense foods. Rather than apportioning blame, what are needed today are solutions.

In Europe and Switzerland measures are required today in particular to counter any further development of this trend, as it is presently taking place in the USA. There, quick service food has practically become a fact of daily life. In Switzerland, fast food outlets are still less frequented than in the USA but even here, nearly a fifth of all 15 to 24-year-olds consume quick meals more than twice a week.

Social changes over recent decades show that there is a need for action. Although we can today select from an infinite variety of meals, our everyday decisions are largely influenced

by basic social conditions and availabilities. The increasing mobility of our modern society makes the choice of our meals ever more situation-dependent; we increasingly decide what, where and when to eat on the spur of the moment. In the course of these social developments it is therefore essential to increase the availability of well-balanced and appropriately priced quick meals which are also tasty and adequately promoted to the target group. Providing complementary options in fast food outlets – and this also includes the retail food trade as well as specialist shops (e.g. bakeries) – would be a good step in the right direction.

The Swiss Society for Nutrition intends to do precisely this. Pilot projects are planned to start in 2005, which will put the findings of the present report into practice. One of the first steps will be to develop recipes for nutritionally balanced quick meals. Whenever possible, these recipes will be developed in co-operation with suppliers, so that they also find their way to the retail outlets.

Plans are also afoot for nutrition communication efforts directed at teenagers and young adults to make them more aware of the importance of a healthy lifestyle and in particular a balanced diet. To be successful, these efforts must adopt a social and emotional approach and be in keeping with the life attitudes and needs of the target group. Topics concerning quick meals are particularly suitable as vehicles for efforts to improve eating habits because there has been an increasing awareness of this subject for some years now – not least of all because of the discussions of the recently rejected lawsuit brought against *McDonald's* in the USA on behalf of overweight children. Then there is also – albeit disputed – a documentary film, *Super Size Me* by Morgan Spurlock, which has heightened awareness of the present obesity problem, in particular with food suppliers. The time for measures in this area is, therefore, ideal.