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Level: Grades 7-10

About the Author

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Lesson Plan Selling Obesity

Overview

In this lesson, students look at the health issues that are associated with our fast food culture, and the advertising of it. Students begin with a snack-food survey to assess their own eating habits. Through class discussion, they explore North American fast food culture, and the role that marketers play in promoting these types of foods to children and teens. At the end of the class, students choose from a number of activities that help them understand this issue in greater depth.

Learning Outcomes

Students will demonstrate:

- awareness of the health issues associated with over-consumption of snack foods and fast foods
- awareness of how the fast food and snack food industries encourage over consumption of their products through advertising and serving sizes
- an understanding of their own responses to advertising of fast food and snack food
- continuing awareness of the types of foods needed to maintain a healthy lifestyle
- continuing awareness of the principles of balance and moderation in fitting snack foods into a healthy diet

Preparation and Materials

Photocopy the following student handouts:

- *Food Facts*
- *Snack Food Survey*

Refer to:

- *Canada's Food Guide*
<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/nutrition/pube/foodguid/>

Procedure

Guided Discussion

- Ask students to brainstorm definitions for the term "junk food." (*Generally, junk food is a slang word used to describe pre-packaged snack foods with limited nutritional value – foods that are high in salt, sugar, fat or calories, with low nutrient contents.*)
- What are some examples of junk foods?

- Ask students to define the term “fast food.” (*Fast foods are quick, reasonably priced and readily available alternatives to home cooking.*)

Distribute the *Snack Food Survey* to students.

- Once it’s completed, discuss their answers as a class.
- Based on their responses, how would students rate their fast food/snack food habits overall?
- According to students, what are the most popular fast food restaurants?
- What’s the most popular snack food?

Ask students:

- Do you consider fast food/snack food to be a significant part of teen culture in North America? Why or why not?
- What are some of the reasons why North Americans consume so much junk food and fast food? (*Answers might include: excessive marketing; disposable income; easy access to fast food in neighbourhoods, schools, malls, etc.; busy lives that don’t leave time to prepare proper meals; peer or family influences.*)
- What are the positive elements of fast food? (*Eating at fast food restaurants is fun, the food is tasty, it’s convenient, it’s inexpensive, fast food restaurants provide a popular place for teens to socialize.*)
- What are some of the negative aspects of fast food? (*Many fast foods are high in calories, fat, saturated fat, sugar, and salt. There are also concerns relating to the environmental cost of fast food. For example, valuable land and water that could be used to grow crops for people are being used to support livestock for the food industry instead.*)
- Distribute the *Food Facts* sheet to students and review the key points. (*You might want to bring in a twelve-ounce container and a thirty-two-ounce container to illustrate the difference in average serving size for soft drinks.*)

Ask students:

- What surprised you most on this sheet?
- Why is the marketing of fast food to children of concern to health officials?
- What are some of the ways that fast food is marketed to kids? (*Answers may include: commercials; billboards; toys; clothing; jingles; games; Internet sites; special-sized meals for kids of different ages; cross-marketing with movie and television figurines or popular toys; prizes and games with kiddie meals; indoor playgrounds; and branding – even very young children can recognize those golden arches!*)
- Why would fast food restaurants target young children in their marketing campaigns? (*Make sure that students consider the “whine factor” as well as brand loyalty and brand recognition. In most families, children exert tremendous influence – in other words, if a four-year-old insists on going to Burger King, chances are parents and siblings will accompany him or her.*)

Ask students to think back to when they themselves were younger, or to keep younger siblings in mind, as they answer the following questions:

- Have you ever tried a food product because you liked the commercial?
- Have you ever dragged your family along to a fast food place that you wanted to visit?

- Have you ever visited a fast food restaurant because of the prizes they give away with the meals?
- Have you ever collected movie figurines through a promotion at a fast food restaurant?
- Do you own any clothing that features food slogans or logos?
- Can you think of any advertising campaigns for healthy foods that are as popular as advertising campaigns for snack foods? (*The "Got Milk" campaign is one of the few campaigns for non-snack foods that has captured the imaginations of young people.*)
 - In a 1998 article on the causes of obesity, American nutrition expert squarely blamed the fast food industry for using advertising and promotion to constantly pressure us to eat. The combination of unprecedented access to a poor diet – to high-calorie foods that are widely available, low in cost, heavily promoted, and good-tasting – and a culture that discourages people from being physically active, has lead to the creation of a "toxic food environment" that's hazardous to our health. In particular, he points the finger at strategies such as "super-sizing" servings as an example of how food marketing adversely affects our health.

(Kelly Brownell, "The Pressure to Eat," in *Nutrition Action*, July/August 1998.)

- Why are people attracted to "super-sized" fast food? (*Consumers believe they're getting better value for their money. Did you ever notice how Starbucks' smallest-size coffee is called "tall," not "small"? Even when servings aren't that large, they are labeled to make consumers feel that they're getting added value.*)
- Do super sizes make us eat more? (*Researchers have found that when we order larger portions of food, we in fact more than we're actually hungry for.*)

How much difference does super-sizing make? Using McDonalds' hamburgers and fries as an example, give students the calorie and fat measurements of regular servings then have them guess the super-sized equivalents:



McDonalds Small French Fries:
210 calories, 10 grams of fat,
1.5 grams of saturated fat

McDonalds Super Size French
Fries: 610 calories, 29 grams
of fat, 5 grams of saturated fat

Ask students:

- Is all fast food bad food?
- What are some examples of healthy fast food? (*Grilled chicken sandwiches, baked potatoes, small hamburgers minus the mayonnaise, wraps, and salads – these are some of the healthier choices you can make. Be careful, though. Some foods that appear to be healthy or low in calories may not be. For example, a large Starbucks' White Chocolate Mocha, made with whole milk, has 600 calories and three-quarters of a day's allowance of saturated fat. And a Taco Bell Taco Salad contains 850 calories and 52 grams of fat – a better choice would be a Subway Salad Delite, with only 51 calories.*)

Activities

- In their journals, have students keep track of how much snack food and fast food they consume in a week. In addition to recording the food they eat, have students record their activities while snacking. Do any patterns emerge?
- Have students record the number of food commercials that appear during Saturday morning cartoons. What products are most advertised?
- Have students deconstruct the language, images and messages in ads for snack foods and fast foods. (See the lesson *You've Gotta Have a Gimmick* for ideas.)
- One proposed solution to the health concerns about the North American junk food crisis is to levy a tax on fast food – and apply that money to the promotion of healthy foods. Have students list other solutions to this problem.
- Part of the problem with many “healthy living” public service announcements, and advertisements for healthy foods, is that young people seldom perceive these messages as being “cool.” Individually or as a group, have students create advertising campaigns that would appeal to kids their age. (*Students might want to deconstruct the “Got Milk?” campaign as a successful model.*)
- Conduct a class debate on whether or not the fast food industry should be permitted to advertise to children. Have students assume the roles of health practitioners, kids, parents, and fast food producers to argue for or against this issue.
- Have students come up with a list of guidelines for advertising fast food, soft drinks and snack foods to children.
- Have students survey local fast food outlets and grocery stores for kids' promotions. (If possible, have them collect samples of advertisements and promotions.) Create a billboard that provides a snapshot of how the food industry advertises to kids.

- Have students track cross-marketing promotions between fast food outlets and upcoming movies.
- Have students visit kids' sections of Web sites for fast food companies, and analyze the ways in which these companies use online games and activities to engage children and build brand recognition and loyalty.
- Have students create and conduct a "Fast Food I.Q." survey for younger students. This could include:
 - a questionnaire similar to the [Snack Food Survey](#)
 - a section where they provide pictures of "spokescharacters" for various fast food outlets and snack foods (such as the McDonalds "Hamburgler," Cheetos' Cheetah, Taco Bell's Chihuahua) and ask the children to identify the company each represents
 - a "name that jingle" or "name that slogan" section where children must match fast food companies, or snack foods or beverages, to the correct slogan or jingle
 - Once completed, have students summarize their results
- **For secondary students:** Students in grades 9 and 10 could read and write a book report on *Fast Food Nation* by Eric Schlosser. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001.)

Related Lesson on the Media Awareness Network Website

- You've Gotta Have a Gimmick

Mnet Recommends reading, viewing, surfing

- Center for Science in the Public Interest
<http://www.cspinet.org/>
- Nutrition Action Article
http://www.cspinet.org/nah/7_98eat.htm
- Fast Food Facts
<http://www.kenkuhl.com/fastfood/>

Food Facts

Call it fast food, snack food or even junk food – North Americans love it! Here are some interesting facts about junk food.



- In the United States, the food industry spends more than \$33 billion a year to advertise products that are mostly loaded with fat, salt and sugar.
- Every month, more than 90 per cent of the children in the United States eat at McDonald's
- The American National Cancer Institute spends \$1 million per year to encourage people to eat fruits and vegetables.
- Over the past twenty-five years, American researchers have found an increase in fast-food commercials during children's television programming – with many of these commercials emphasizing larger portions.
- According to the Canadian Paediatric Society, most food advertising on children's TV shows is for fast foods, soft drinks, candy and pre-sweetened cereals – while commercials for healthy food make up only 4 per cent of those shown.
- During the 1950s, the typical soft drink order at a fast food restaurant contained about eight ounces of soda. Today, a "child" order of Coke at McDonalds is twelve ounces, and a large Coke is thirty-two ounces (and about 310 calories!).
- Fast food companies make higher profits on soft drinks than on their food products.
- McDonalds is the largest owner of private playgrounds in North America.
- In 1997, Americans spent over \$54 billion on soft drinks.
- Twelve- to nineteen-year-old boys drink an average of 868 cans of pop per year. Girls drink about one-fourth less – about 651 cans per year.
- A super-sized order of McDonald's fries contains 610 calories and 29 grams of fat. Other brands aren't much better: a king-sized order of Burger King's fries packs 590 calories and 30 grams of fat.

- Per ounce, Chicken McNuggets contain twice as much fat as hamburger.
- In the United States, obesity is second only to smoking as a cause of death.
- In Canada, 46 per cent of adults are overweight or obese. Over the past twenty years, obesity rates for Canadian kids have tripled.
- The American artificial flavour industry – the industry that’s behind the great taste of much of the snack food we consume – has annual revenues of approximately \$1.4 billion.
- And speaking of artificial flavouring – a typical strawberry milkshake contains approximately fifty artificial ingredients to create that great “strawberry” taste!

Sources:

[Nutrition Action](#), December 2000.

[Center for Science in the Public Interest](#).

Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001.

Snack Food Survey

Complete this survey to figure out your snack food habits.

On average, each week:

1. How much pop do you consume?
2. How many bags of snack foods such as potato chips, pretzels or cheesies? (Are they large bags or small bags?)
3. How often do you eat sweets such as candy or chocolate bars?
4. How often do you eat baked or fried sweets such as cookies or donuts?
5. How often do you eat sweetened cereal for breakfast?
6. How often to you eat at fast food outlets such as Wendy's, Burger King, Taco Bell, Pizza Pizza, etc.?
7. What fast food outlet are you most likely to visit?
8. When you go to a fast food restaurant, what size of serving are you most likely to order?
9. How often do you "super-size" your order?