

Maccas or Woolworths?

Why do we always demonise the large fast food chains (McDonalds, KFC, Pizza Hut) for the apparent poor quality of the food they peddle? Sure they sell food high in fat, salt and sugar and it's priced so the food is affordable to everyone but who really sells the unhealthiest food?

The number of McDonalds restaurants in Canberra back in the 1980s was two, now there are over 15 and all are conveniently located in more suburban locations with a few located in the larger shopping precincts like Civic and Belconnen; the same applies to KFC.

But what about the supermarkets? Do people ever criticise them for the foods they sell at reduced prices? We not only have the duopoly between Coles and Woolworths but now we have the choice of cheaper groceries from Aldi and the independents like IGA and Supabarn. Just like the fast food chains, the number and convenient locations of supermarkets has also increased over the years.

When you look inside supermarkets, they sell a huge range of products from the healthy fruit, vegetables, legumes, lentils, lean meats and whole grains to the downright unhealthy chocolate, lollies, cakes, biscuits, chips, ice cream, desserts, sugar and oils. The amount of products which fit into this category within supermarkets is huge with over 20 varieties of ice-cream, 30 varieties of soft drinks, 15 varieties of chips, 15 varieties of sweet biscuits and too many chocolate and lolly varieties to count.

Then there is the price. You can walk into any supermarket, especially the larger chains and you will always find the high sugar, fat and salt foods heavily discounted. Think about this, 30 cans of Coca Cola for \$19 (63 cents a can) and 2 litres of soft drink for \$2 (cheaper than a litre of petrol), a 175 gram packet of chips for \$2 and two packets of Tim Tams for only \$5. Then there are Cadbury chocolate bars for only 85 cents or the 190 gram packet of Allen's lollies for \$2.

If you consider the energy content of these foods, it's even more mind numbing. The 175 gram pack of chips has 2500kj (595 calories), the 190 gram packet of lollies with 2900kj (690 calories) and the pack of Tim Tams with over 4000kj (1000 calories). That's half the daily energy requirements for most people in one packet. If you are on a tight budget, two packets of Tim Tams will have your energy needs cover for five bucks a day.

Now, I'm not suggesting you cut these foods out of your diet, I'm just trying to increase awareness of the availability and energy content of these foods. My original point is that there is a strong focus on the fast food industry and the apparent poor quality of the food they serve up. Don't get me wrong, I believe some of the food served up at fast food chains lack nutritional quality and is highly processed and high in fat, salt and sugar but I also believe supermarkets are just as much to blame for selling heavily discounted food which has poor nutritional value. If we are considering taxing soft drinks, then we also should be taxing other high energy nutritionally poor foods sold in supermarkets and fast food chains.

It's too narrow minded to say the cause of illness or the overweight problem is related to one food or nutrient. Nutrition is a highly complex science, so consider your whole diet and the food you eat consistently. If the consistent foods include these discretionary choices, then it may be time to look closer at how much of these foods you are eating and how often the they eaten each day.

A simple strategy is to limit your intake of these discretionary foods to one or two serves a day, get plenty of fruit and vegetables, lean meats, dairy and wholegrains in your diet and prepare most of your meals at home. There is nothing wrong with eating out at fast food restaurants just like there is nothing wrong with having a chocolate bar. It's the habitual eating behaviour which can have the biggest impact on your health and weight, so changing an unhealthy behaviour to a healthy one is the first step in the right direction.

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