

MICROWAVE MEALS FOR KIDS

TRADING SPEED FOR HEALTH?

Food manufacturers are marketing the microwaveable kiddie meal—and the news is a mixed blessing for two-career parents. On the pro side, there is the pushbutton convenience. On the minus side, three out of four makers of frozen or shelf-stable meals are mimicking unhealthy fast-food fare.

For example, five of the eight meals offered by Conagra's Kid Cuisine obtain more than 40 percent of their calories from fat (the American Heart Association advises no more than 30 percent in the overall diet). Two of the meals contain 1,000 mg or more of sodium—one third of the AHA daily recommendation and a hefty amount considering the salty snacks kids are likely to eat.

With high-fat convenience foods, "you're increasing the chance these kids will get heart disease," says Jayne Hurley, R.D., a nutritionist with the Center for Science in the Public Interest. "Kids in the first and second decades of life are showing fatty streaks in their arteries."

The healthiest choice on the market seems to be My Own Meals. Their five entrees are high in protein, moderate in sodium and free of artificial colors, flavors and MSG. Fat supplies 16 to 38 percent of the meals' calories for children ages two to ten. Entrees include whole grain, lean meat and vegetable combos such as turkey meatballs and noodles with vegetables. So far they're marketed in 16 states, and are even in 156 Toys 'R' Us outlets.

"Kids need something other than hamburgers and pizza," says My Own Meals president Mary Anne Jackson, who tested the entrees on hundreds of children. "Parents may find them bland, but kids liked milder flavors."

On the other hand, Conagra spokesperson Susan Hanley feels that children want the kind of breaded, deep-fried chicken and macaroni and cheese that Kid Cuisine provides. "We selected flavors we feel kids will eat," she says. "We don't feel there are any strict nutritional guidelines."

Typically, portions are only slightly smaller than adult frozen entrees (perhaps too big for little appetites)—but cost from one to two dollars less.

As if the health impact of the trend weren't enough to worry about, kids who microwave their own meals sometimes get burned by a hot container or steam escaping from a lifted lid. The Shriners Burns Institutes has evidence of over 200 microwave-involved injuries to kids since 1986. "I don't think kids under 12 should use microwave ovens unsupervised," says Louis Slesin, editor of "Microwave News."

Both children and adults may be at risk from cancer-causing materials in certain packaging. Under study by the FDA are metallic heat receptors that aid browning in foods like pizza. Until they're proved safe, some experts advise using glass cookware.

But the trend of fast food at home appears inevitable. Although a lifetime of such foods may not be ideal, says Ellen Haas, executive director of Public Voice for Food and Health Policy in Washington, D.C., with nearly 65 percent of working women coming home to hungry school-age children, "there's a real need."

FOUR KIDS' ENTREES

HOW THEY MEASURE UP

Here's a nutritional close-up on four different brands of pasta dishes. Note that two run quite high in sodium, and two edge over the 30 percent fat-calories allowance.

- My Own Meals' My Favorite Pasta (beans, grains, meat and macaroni) (8.5-oz. serving): 230 cal., 31 percent from fat; 11 g protein, 28 g carbohydrates, 8 g fat, 480 mg sodium.

- Tyson Looney Tunes' Tweety Macaroni & Cheese (9.75-oz. serving): 280 cal., 26 percent from fat; 10 g protein, 42 g carbohydrates, 8 g fat, 630 mg sodium.

- Hormel Kid's Kitchen Macaroni & Cheese (7.5-oz. serving): 170 cal., 26 percent from fat; 8 g protein, 23 g carbohydrates, 5 g fat, 1,000 mg sodium.

- Kid Cuisine's Macaroni & Cheese with Mini-Franks (9-oz. serving): 380 cal., 33 percent from fat; 9 g protein, 55 g carbohydrates, 14 g fat, 1,000 mg sodium.



Some new entrees mimic traditional fast food in terms of fat and sodium content—a diet that can set kids up for heart disease by the time they're teenagers.