

# FOOD FOR THOUGHT

## Who's making dinner when Mom (or Dad) isn't?

It's dinnertime. Do you know what your children are eating? Perhaps not, if you are a working parent who finds it too hard to get home in time to cook dinner for the kids—or too tiring to prepare something after an exhausting day at the office. But there's no need to agonize over it, say some food industry giants; they'll make dinner for you. At least three companies, including ConAgra, My Own Meals, and Tyson Foods, have cooked up new lines of microwaveable meals just for children aged two to 10. All promise nutritious, tasty dinners—many with side dishes and desserts—that can be prepared with a simple zap of the oven. Unfortunately, they don't always deliver everything they promise.

Claims that the meals are "nutritious" and "wholesome" notwithstanding, many chalk up a good deal of fat. Kid Cuisine Fried Chicken, with its chicken wings, mashed potatoes, corn, and

chocolate peanut butter cookie, for example, derives a full 48 percent of its 430 calories from fat. That's a lot for one dinner. The guidelines recently written under the direction of the National Cholesterol Education Program, and endorsed by 38 health and medical organizations, recommend that all Americans over the age of two follow a diet that gets no more than 30 percent of its calories from fat. Tyson Looney Tunes Meals tend to rank on the high-fat side, too. Five of the company's eight meal choices, in fact, contain at least 35 percent fat calories. Sodium levels can also run high. Consider that Kid Cuisine Macaroni & Cheese with Mini-Franks contains 1,000 milligrams of sodium, or nearly half the upper daily limit recommended by the National Academy of Sciences.

Granted, not all the choices are laden with sodium and/or fat. And even if a dinner does hap-

## To nuke or not to nuke: a guide to kids' micro-meals

	Weight (oz)	Calories	Fat* (gm)	% Calories from fat	Sodium (mg)
<b>Banquet Kid Cuisine (ConAgra)</b>					
For ages 3 to 10. Each dinner includes an entree, two sides such as french fries and green beans, and a dessert.					
Beef Patty Sandwich with Cheese	6.25	400	19	43	550
Cheese Pizza	6.5	240	4	15	390
Chicken Nuggets	6.25	400	19	43	610
Fish Nuggets	7	320	15	42	750
Fried Chicken	7.5	430	23	48	660
Macaroni & Cheese with Mini-Franks	9	380	14	33	1000
Mini-Cheese Ravioli	8.75	250	2	7	730
Spaghetti with Meatsauce	9.25	310	12	35	690

### My Own Meals\*\*

For ages 2 to 8. Each meal contains an entree only.

	Weight (oz)	Calories	Fat* (gm)	% Calories from fat	Sodium (mg)
Chicken, Please	8	220	4	16	550
My Favorite Pasta	8.5	230	8	31	480
My Kind of Chicken	8	220	7	29	590
My Meatballs & Shells	8	210	9	39	440
My Turkey Meatballs	8	260	11	38	600

### Tyson Looney Tunes Meals

For ages 4 to 10. Each meal contains an entree and two side dishes, such as mashed potatoes and corn.

	Weight (oz)	Calories	Fat* (gm)	% Calories from fat	Sodium (mg)
Bugs Bunny Chicken Chunks	7.4	340	14	37	740
Daffy Duck Spaghetti & Meatballs	8.7	320	10	28	650
Road Runner Chicken Sandwich	6.7	310	12	35	520
Speedy Gonzales Beef Enchiladas	9.5	390	15	35	680
Sylvester Fish Sticks	7.3	270	11	37	660
Tweety Macaroni & Cheese	9.8	280	8	26	630
Wile E. Coyote Hamburger Pizza	6	320	11	31	660
Yosemite Sam BBQ Chicken	8.4	280	12	39	510

\*To determine the number of calories in the meal that come from fat, multiply the grams of fat by 9.

\*\*For children aged two to three, My Own Meals considers one serving to be half a package. Nutritional values given here are for whole packages.

pen to contain a good deal of sodium or consists of more than 30 percent fat calories, that doesn't mean it can never fit into a healthful diet. Indeed, for the youngster who routinely eats a bag of potato chips or a row of cookies for dinner, any of the new microwaveable meals makes a relatively healthful substitute. But when the dinners replace more nutritious, low-fat fare on a regular basis, they can potentially undo a child's otherwise healthful diet.

Nutrition aside, parents would do well to make certain that children do not heat the dinners in the microwave by themselves. Some of the labels contain a warning to that effect, but it's easy to forget the advice, because the package designs and meal names are aimed at children and the microwave seems so easy for youngsters to operate. To help remember, keep in mind that severe steam burns resulting from opening a heated dinner too close to the face, together with mouth burns caused by biting into unevenly heated dinners, are not unheard of in pediatricians' offices.

## ASK THE EXPERTS

**Q:** *Why is it that some brands of ice cream list serving size in terms of fluid ounces when ice cream is a solid? Is there some sort of math I need to do to figure out how much ice cream I'm really taking from the container?*

**A:** No. The term "fluid ounces" has nothing to do with whether a product is a liquid or a solid—or melted or frozen, for that matter. It simply refers to how many ounces a food will fill in a measuring cup. In other words, it's an indication of volume, or how much space a food takes up (the word "ounces" by itself refers to a product's weight). As an example, if a brand gives serving size as four fluid ounces, one serving fills half a cup. Ice cream companies are free to use the "half cup" or the "four fluid ounces" term.

Incidentally, Food and Drug Administration regulations stipulate that if a food is a liquid, the label should state contents in terms of fluid ounces and that if it's solid, semisolid, or viscous (like thick syrup), the label should state contents in terms of ounces by weight, all of which would make it seem as though ice cream servings should be listed by weight. But the regulations go on to say that "if there is a firmly established general consumer usage and trade custom of declaring the contents of a . . . solid, semisolid, or viscous product by fluid measure, it may be used." That is, tra-

dition dictates that serving sizes of ice cream be given in fluid ounces rather than in terms of how many ounces the product weighs.

One last point. The reason most solids must be listed in terms of actual weight rather than fluid ounces is that solids, unlike liquids or liquidy foods, can fill up more or less of a measuring cup depending on how tightly they are packed, rendering fluid measures imprecise. A half cup of loosely packed raisins, for example, contains fewer raisins than a half cup tightly packed.

**Q:** *You have said in past issues that a 3.5-ounce serving of light tuna canned in water contains 3.2 milligrams of iron, or between 15 and 20 percent of the USRDA of 18 milligrams. But the labels on the cans of popular brands say a serving of light tuna has only 4 percent of the USRDA for iron. Why the discrepancy?*

**A:** Our information came from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Handbook 8, which is considered the bible of nutrient values for foods. We called the USDA for an explanation, and the principal investigator for the section on fish, Jacob Exler, PhD, explained that the figure in the handbook is based on a nutritional analysis of only one sample of light tuna canned in water. If more samples had been averaged in, he speculates, the value for iron would have been lower. He adds that the 4 percent value seen on the cans comes from food companies' own analyses. They do a nutritional breakdown of their own samples and may be able to use many more samples than the USDA can to come up with a more reliable average.

By the way, light tuna, which is darker than white tuna, has the higher iron content of the two. Analyses from both the USDA and the tuna processors agree on that.

**Q:** *Why does my nose always run when I eat spicy foods? Is it a food allergy?*

**A:** Probably not. True food allergies, the symptoms of which often include sneezing, itching, and skin rashes, are quite rare, but a runny nose that comes about from consuming certain "hot" foods is fairly common. Hot chili peppers, horseradish, hot and sour soup, red cayenne pepper, and tabasco sauce are among the usual causes of the condition, known technically as gustatory rhinitis. These items all contain chemicals that stimulate nerve endings in the mouth, thereby triggering a series of reflexes that lead not only to a runny nose but, in many cases, to a flushed face, perspiring forehead, and teary eyes as well.

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