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BACKGROUND

The most recent statistics released by the CDC estimate that more than one third of US adults are obese. Likely our most pressing public health concern, obesity represents a major risk factor for several of our nation’s leading causes of preventable death including heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and some forms of cancer. To compound matters, the annual medical cost burden associated with obesity is nearly $150 billion, with estimated expenditure being $1429 more for obese Americans each year compared with their nonobese counterparts. Although obesity affects all ages, socioeconomic strata, and racial/ethnic groups, incidence is highest in non-Hispanic blacks, followed by Mexican Americans.

METHODOLOGY AND QUESTIONS

In response to these sobering statistics and using data collected in the 2007–2010 NHANES, the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) recently assessed a factor thought to play an increasing role in our nation’s expanding midsection: caloric intake from fast foods. Specifically, they sought to determine what percentage of calories American adults consume from fast foods (including pizza) and whether this value is influenced by age, sex, race/ethnicity, income level, and adiposity (as assessed using BMI). A summary of the answers to their targeted, obesity-related questions is provided here.

- **What percentage of calories consumed by adults comes from fast food, and is there an effect of age?** Men and women reported consuming an average of 11.3% of their calories from fast foods, with no significant difference between the sexes. However, there was an inverse association between the percentage of calories and age: whereas 20–39-y-old persons consumed 15.3% of their energy from fast foods, those 60 y and older only consumed 6.0% of total energy from these foods.

- **Is there an effect of race/ethnicity?** Results indicate an interaction between age and race/ethnicity on the proportion of calories from fast food; in other words, there was an effect of race/ethnicity, but it depended on age. Whereas non-Hispanic black individuals consumed a significantly higher percentage of calories from fast foods compared with both non-Hispanic white and Hispanic persons when they were 20–39 y of age (21.1%, 14.6%, and 14.5%, respectively), this effect disappeared by the time they were 60 y old, at which time their mean caloric intake from fast foods averaged 6.1%.

- **Is there an effect of income?** In young adults (20–39 y), increasing income was associated with a lower percentage of calories from fast foods. This trend was not evident in older age groups.

- **Is there an effect of weight status?** The researchers found a consistent positive relationship between BMI and the percentage of calories obtained from fast food. Overall, underweight/normal-weight, overweight, and obese individuals obtained 9.6%, 11.2%, and 13.1% (P < 0.05 for trend), respectively, of their energy from fast food sources.

SUMMARY

The authors of the study concluded that US adults consume >10% of their calories from fast foods, with the highest percentages reported in non-Hispanic black or obese individuals and those between 20 and 39 y of age. However, they point out that data collected as part of the 2003–2006 NHANES estimated 13% of calories were obtained from fast food, pointing to a potentially important decrease over the past decade.

FOR MORE INFORMATION