

Editorial

Increasing trend of Junk food use in Saudi Arabia and health implications

In Saudi Arabia there is increasing trend of junk food use. Combined with sedentary life style, high prevalence of obesity, diabetes mellitus, hypertension and coronary heart disease, it is detrimental to health and will aggravate existing life style diseases in the country. People here eat more consuming more quantity with less quality. The fast food market in Saudi Arabia is expected to reach \$4.5 billion in gross sales by 2015, driven by growing demand from its population. ⁽¹⁾

Fast food is a major enterprise in Saudi Arabia. The major chains like Mc -Donald's, Pizza Hut, Burger King, Hardees, Little Caesars, Subway, Dunkin Donuts to name a few. Most meal packages with fries and coke run around 15 -20 SAR. Beside multinational food chains some national brands are Al- Baik, Showerma Joha and Kudu are available. ⁽²⁾

Junk food, fast food and trash food are all definitions of a quick, unhealthy, hunger satisfying food, which are easy to make and easy to consume. They are low in nutritional value with a high caloric value. The term 'Junk food' was coined by Michael Jacobson, director of Center for Science in 1972. Junk food contains high level of refined sugar, white flour, polyunsaturated fats, salts and numerous food additives but lacking in protein, vitamin and fibers. Junk food is popular because of their simplicity of manufacture, consumption and good taste. ⁽³⁾

Junk foods as burgers, pizza, fried chicken and chips usually has high amount of saturated fats. Fats cause people to put on weight and being overweight is a risk to heart and causes other disease as obesity and diabetes. Junk food often has too much salt which may make hypertension worse. Similarly soft drinks, cordials, biscuits, cakes have huge amount of sugars which makes people fat and has bad effect on the teeth.

Various types of junk food is available in market out of which the most popular junk food are soft drink, pizza, hamburgers, potato chips, ice-creams, hot dog, French fries, cheese chili, etc. Junk food addiction is high as it's easy to prepare and are tasty. Peoples prefer to eat them while watching TV, they save themselves from lot of hassles and time when they are in a hurry as they are served at their door step hot and ready to eat. ⁽⁴⁾

If time constraint is one reason that pushes peoples to eating junk food, great taste also, to an extent influences them to opt for junk food. But junk foods get their taste owing to lavish usage of oils, salts and sugar.

Junk food advertising has a major role in its promotion. There is also concern about the targeting to children and adolescents because they are easy and potential target for junk food. Similarly transportation of junk food is easy due to its packaging and cost is less as compared to healthy food.

The nutritional value of junk food is least, the nutritional value is lost in the process of making the junk food so synthetic vitamins and minerals are added to it, but they are not good compared to natural vitamins and minerals. Junk food has lots of chemical additives which are not useful to body like artificial coloring and preservatives.

Harmful effects of junk food

Harmful effects of junk food may be long term or short terms; fat contents have high cholesterol level. High calorie content with sugar can lead to obesity. Cholesterol and salt can increase blood pressure, stroke and heart diseases. Excessive salt can worsen the hypertension.

Junk food places people at risk of strokes from high blood pressure, type II diabetes mellitus, heart attacks from raised LDL cholesterol levels, cancer of the colon and immune system is compromised and a greater chance of contracting other cancers as levels of antioxidants is so low (colon, breast, prostate, gallbladder, ovarian) It also leads to weight gain and obesity, further increasing the likelihood of strokes and heart attacks. ⁽⁵⁾

Junk food some facts

1. The junk food industry deliberately targets children and young to create brand preference and lifelong loyalty.

2. Fast food chains use the lure of free toys to get kids to persuade their parents to spend. A desirable toy can double or triple weekly sales of kid's meals. Every child brings along at least one adult too.
3. Artificial flavors in foods aimed at kids can be twice as sweet as the artificial flavours used in adult food. Many children now prefer man made flavors to taste of real food.
4. Soft drinks are aggressively marketed by fast food chains; because they are so profitable, at around 97% profit on the price per cup. The bigger the cup the greater profit.

Recommendations

Awareness on junk food facts is lacking dramatically in every corner of the society. Some useful tips to avoid junk food are:

1. Junk food and children has strange affinity to each other. Do not let children to get habituated to junk food.
2. Eliminating the temptation for junk food is one way to avoid it. Keeping good food nearby and having meals right on time may help in this direction.
3. Controlling children from eating junk food in schools is another step that helps in a long term. Schools administrator along with parents has a responsibility to educate children about junk foods in schools.
4. Education strategies on nutrition should be developed and launched in order to help children develop healthy eating behaviors. ⁽⁶⁾
5. Health education and intervention program that aim to promote a healthy diet at media and PHC centers. ⁽⁷⁾

References

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