

Ensuring Healthy Options for Kids at Restaurants: *The case for a federal kids' meal policy*

The national movement to improve restaurant kids' meals is growing. Communities and corporations have recognized the need for healthier options on the kids' menu. However, federal action is necessary to expand this policy to cover all children and ensure implementation of this critical effort to improve children's health. A nationally representative poll conducted in October 2024 found that about 75 percent of Americans support restaurants¹ having at least two kids' meals that meet nutrition standards. Further, 83 percent of respondents with children in their household under the age of 13 support restaurants having at least two kids' meals that meet nutrition standards.

Restaurants are a key source of food for U.S. families but kids' meals at restaurants are not the healthiest options. U.S. households with children aged ten and under consume food away from home between four and five times a week on average¹ and caregivers frequently order kids' meals for children when dining at restaurants.² Restaurants frequently offer fried chicken, burgers, and fried potatoes on kids' menus,³ and often bundle kids' meals with drinks high in added sugars.⁴ On days children eat at restaurants, they consume more calories, sugary drinks, saturated fat, and total sugars compared to days they eat food from home.⁵

A recent study that examined beverage offerings at the top 200 restaurant chains in the U.S. found that 44 percent offered sugary drinks to kids in 2021.⁶ Another study found that 71.9 percent of kids' meal combinations at the top 50 restaurant chains in the U.S. failed to meet expert nutrition standards in 2018.⁷

Congress can make a major impact on children's health and wellbeing by ensuring healthy meal options are available for kids at restaurants.

¹ Inclusive of chain and non-chain restaurants.

Example of meal that meets nutrition standards:
Broccoli Beef Panda Cub Meal



Broccoli Beef Panda Cub Meal™

White Rice, Super Greens, Broccoli Beef,
Fruit Side & Bottled Water or Kid's Juice

Calories: 300
Sodium: 500mg
Percent calories from saturated fat: 3%
Added sugars: not listed
(Total sugar 13g: automatically meets added
sugars standard)

The Healthy Food Options at Restaurants for Kids (Healthy FORK) will ensure healthy meals for children.

This legislation will support the health and nutrition of all children by making sure healthy options are available and promoted on kids' menus in restaurants. This bill will require all kids' meal combinations (entrée, side, beverage) to meet expert nutrition standards.

Additionally, given the negative impact sugary beverages can have on children's health outcomes, this bill will require a healthy default, or an automatically served, healthier beverage option.

What do healthy kids' meals look like?

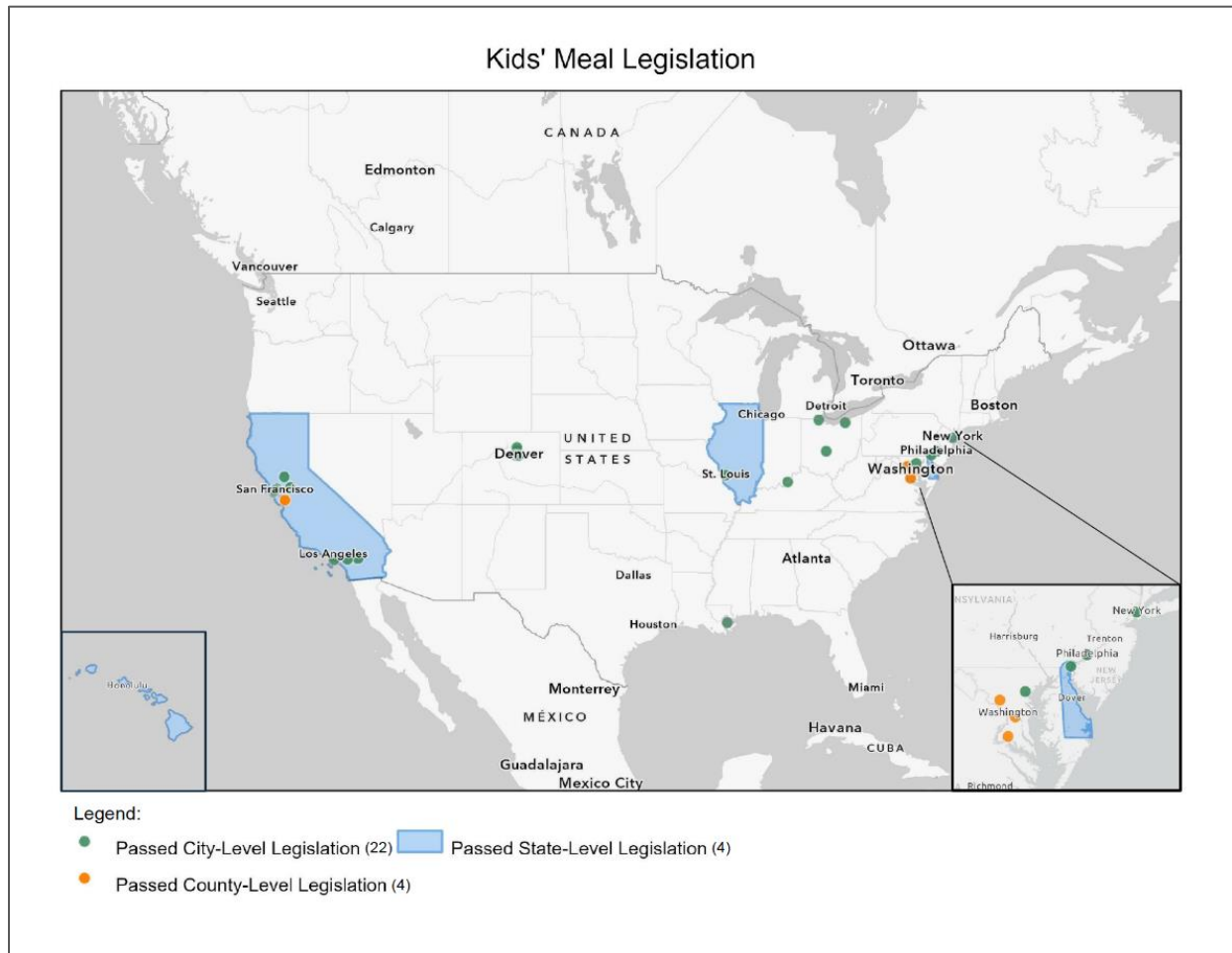
Strong nutrition standards for meals served in restaurants should align with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommendations for children 12 and under.

- These nutrition standards include no more than:
 - 550 calories
 - 15 grams added sugars
 - 10% of calories from saturated fat
 - 700 mg sodium
- Meals must also include at least two of the following and at least one of the two food groups must be a fruit or vegetable:
 - Fruit: $\geq \frac{1}{2}$ cup
 - Vegetable: $\geq \frac{1}{2}$ cup
 - Non/low-fat dairy: $\geq \frac{1}{2}$ cup
 - Whole grains: ≥ 8 grams (and the first ingredient a whole grain or $\geq 50\%$ whole grains by weight of product)
 - Meat or meat alternative: must be equal to 1 oz. meat, poultry, or seafood; 1 egg; $\frac{1}{4}$ cup pulses (beans, peas, lentils) or soy products; (2 tablespoons nut butter; 1 oz. nuts and seeds.
- The beverage automatically included (default) or offered as part of a children's meal must be one or more of the following:
 - Water – Water with no added natural or artificial sweeteners; and/or
 - Milk – Unflavored nonfat or low-fat milk with no added natural or artificial sweeteners; and/or non-dairy milk alternative that is nutritionally similar to cow's milk with no added natural or artificial sweeteners; and/or
 - Juice – 100% fruit or vegetable juice, or fruit and/or vegetable juice combined with water or carbonated water, with no added natural or artificial sweeteners, in a serving size of no more than 6 oz.

States and localities are leading the way, but create inconsistent policies and leaves most states without standards.

Four states and over twenty localities across the country have passed legislation requiring that the default kids’ beverage served in restaurants be healthy.⁸ Three counties in Maryland have passed legislation requiring restaurants to serve at least one kids’ meal that meets nutrition standards.⁹ Additional campaigns are gaining traction in states and localities around the country.

The state and local efforts serve as models, but stronger federal action is required to ensure better health for all children. This bill would not preempt state and local kids’ meal and beverage nutrition standards laws. States and localities could still choose to enact stricter legislation. This bill would also preserve existing state and local policies.



Nutrition standards in kids' meals make a positive impact on kids' health and are feasible for restaurants.

Dozens of the nation's top restaurant chains have dropped sugary drinks from their kids' menu.¹⁰ Approximately 15 major restaurant chains participate in the National Restaurant Association's voluntary Kids LiveWell program¹¹ which requires participating restaurants to serve two meals and two sides that meet nutrition standards and healthy default beverages on their kids' menu.^{12,13} McDonald's has adopted its own nutrition standards for kids' meals.¹⁴

In 2018, McDonald's¹⁵ updated their Global Happy Meal Commitment, to meet stronger nutrition standards in all Happy Meal combinations. As a result, by the end of 2022, the nutrition content of Happy Meal bundled offerings decreased by 29 calories (6%), 56mg of sodium (9%), 0.7 grams of saturated fat (15%), and 1.8 grams of added sugar (26%) on average.¹⁶ When you consider that, on average, over a billion Happy Meals are served per year across various markets, even relatively small changes can make a large-scale impact.¹⁷

The nutrition standards in this bill closely align with the Kids LiveWell program standards, with a few differences that are intended to preserve the integrity of healthy meals and therefore kids' health and nutrition needs. Similarly, the standards McDonald's has created comply with Center for Science in the Public Interest's proposed standards but leave out the food group requirements.

Despite the proof of feasibility of this approach and the documented impact, new commitments have been slow to come in recent years. A federal policy is feasible and would dramatically improve access to healthier kids' meals when families eat out.

Example of meal that meets nutrition standards:
McDonald's 4 Piece Chicken McNuggets Happy Meal



Chicken nuggets, kids fries, 1% low fat milk jug, apple slices

Calories: 395

Added sugars: 0g

Sodium: 510mg

Percent calories from saturated fat: 7.97%

For more information, please contact the Center for Science in the Public Interest at policy@cspinet.org.

Comparison of proposed and industry-developed standards:			
	Proposed for Legislation	Kids LiveWell¹⁸	McDonald's¹⁹
Nutrition Standards			
Calories	≤ 550	≤ 550 kcal	≤ 600
Calories from saturated fat	≤ 10%	≤ 10%	≤ 10%
Added sugars	≤ 15 g	≤ 15 g	≤ 10% of calories
Sodium	≤ 700 mg	≤ 700 mg	≤ 650 mg
Trans Fat	0 mg	0 mg	--
Food Group Requirements			
Fruit	≥ ½ cup	≥ ½ cup (includes 100% juice)	--
Vegetable	≥ ½ cup	≥ ½ cup	--
Meat or meat alternative	Meat or meat alternative equaling to at least 1 oz. meat, poultry, or seafood; 1 egg; ¼ cup pulses (beans, peas, lentils) or soy products; 2 tablespoons nut butter; 1 oz. nuts and seeds.	Meat, poultry, seafood, eggs, pulses (beans, peas, lentils), soy products, and nuts and seeds. ≥ 1 oz. eq is 1 oz. of meat, poultry, or seafood; 1 egg; 1/4 c of cooked beans or tofu; 2 Tbsp peanut butter; or 1 oz. of nuts or seeds	--
Non/low-fat dairy	≥ ½ cup	≥ 1 cup; ½ cup yogurt	--
Whole grains	≥ 8 g (and at least one of the following: first ingredient a whole grain or ≥ 50% whole grains by weight of product)	≥ 8 g of whole grains and meet at least one of the following: First ingredient a whole grain; ≥ 50% whole grains by weight of product; or 50% whole grains by weight of grains	--
Notes	Must include at least two food groups and at least one of the two food groups must be a fruit or vegetable.	Must include at least two food groups.	
Default Beverage Requirement			
Water	Water with no added natural or artificial sweeteners	Water, sparkling water or flavored water, with no added natural or artificial sweeteners	--
Milk	Unflavored nonfat or low-fat milk with no added natural or artificial sweeteners; and/or non-dairy milk alternative that is nutritionally similar to cow's milk with no added natural or artificial sweeteners	Flavored or unflavored nonfat or low-fat (1%) dairy milk or non-dairy beverage that is nutritionally equivalent to fluid milk (i.e., soy milk) in a serving size of 8 oz. or less	--
Juice	100% fruit or vegetable juice, or fruit and/or vegetable juice combined with water or carbonated water, with no added natural or artificial sweeteners, in a serving size of no more than 6 oz.	100% fruit or vegetable juice, or fruit and/or vegetable juice combined with water or carbonated water, with no added natural or artificial sweeteners, in a serving size of 8 oz. or less	--

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