

# Can a Happy Meal ever really be 'healthy'? McDonald's is trying its best.



## A McDonald's Happy Meal. (McDonald's)

The McDonald's Happy Meal is about to get a makeover. On Thursday, the fast-food chain announced new nutrition standards for its kids' meals and upcoming menu swaps designed to make options for children healthier.

By June 2018, all its U.S. Happy Meals will contain less than 600 calories — and most will contain less than 650 milligrams of salt. The chain is shrinking the size of the fries that come with kids' Chicken McNuggets and

reformulating its chocolate milk to make it less sugary.

*[Olympic athletes love McDonald's. But its role in PyeongChang will be the smallest in decades.]*

Bottled water will soon become a default Happy Meal option. Cheeseburgers will drop off entirely. The chain has also promised to continue promoting fresh fruits and vegetables as a Happy Meal side, building on the success of its baby carrots and “Cutie” tangerines.

Taken together, the changes do not transform burgers or chicken nuggets into health foods. But McDonald's and public health experts who have reviewed the chain's plans say they have the potential to incrementally improve the diets of millions of children.

One-third of U.S. kids [eat fast food each day](#), according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

“We think McDonald's is raising the bar,” said Howell Wechsler, the chief executive of the national public health nonprofit Alliance for a Healthier Generation, which advised McDonald's on the menu changes. “It's a challenge to other companies in the field to get out there and do what's right for kids.”

In addition to the calorie and sodium goals, the chain's new “nutrition criteria” aim to get meals below 10 percent of calories from saturated fat, and 10 percent of calories from added sugar.

McDonald's says all menu-listed Happy Meals in the U.S. will meet these goals by June, with the exception of the sodium reduction. (Most U.S. kids' meals already range from roughly 400 to 600 calories, but many exceed the new goals for salt, fat and sugar.) In the other 120 countries where

McDonald's operates, the chain hopes to have half its meals compliant by the end of 2022.

To make that happen, the restaurant is introducing new menu options — such as a grilled chicken sandwich for kids, available in Italy — as well as tweaking the recipes and serving sizes of old ones. McDonald's six-piece nugget meal will now come with a 110-calorie serving of fries, instead of the standard 230-calorie small order.

The chain is also dropping kids' cheeseburgers, which have an extra 50 calories and 200 milligrams of sodium over regular burgers.

This is the latest in several improvements that McDonald's has made to its children's menu over the past seven years, some of them in partnership with the Alliance, which works with corporations and schools to improve the food environment.

In 2011, McDonald's announced plans to reduce added sugar and sodium in several of its Happy Meal recipes. It also added apple slices to its Happy Meals and shrank the serving size of fries to 1.1 ounces.

Two years later, the chain [agreed to drop soda](#) as a default option in kids' meals and to more aggressively advertise fruits and vegetables as side-dish options.

And just last November, McDonald's swapped out the apple juice in its Happy Meals, trading Minute Maid for a lower sugar organic juice from the brand Honest Kids.

“We've really focused our efforts on families and children,” said Julia Braun, McDonald's director of nutrition.

By most accounts, those efforts have been successful. In [a report on the](#)

[restaurant's sales](#) in 13 countries commissioned by the Alliance last year, public policy consulting firm Keybridge found that milk, water and juice sales at McDonald's had ticked up nine percentage points between 2013 and 2016. Better-for-you sides have also begun to encroach on the classic red sleeve of french fries: Between 2014 and 2016, McDonald's sold 406.2 million low-fat yogurts and 38 million clementines.

Other restaurants have also overhauled their kids' menus. After McDonald's removed soda as a default option for kids, Burger King, Wendy's, Dairy Queen and Jack in the Box followed suit.

A [2017 report](#) by the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) found that the percentage of top-50 chain restaurants with sugary drinks on their kids' menus fell from 93 percent to 74 percent over the preceding 10-year period.

"Improving beverage options on children's menus is good for kids now and for years to come," CSPI's vice president for nutrition, Margo Wootan, [said at the time](#) in a statement.

Of course, some experts caution that, even with these improvements, parents shouldn't make fast-food meals a regular part of their children's diets. The national nonprofit Corporate Accountability, a frequent critic of McDonald's, points out that a 600-calorie meal is still excessive for some young and less active children, according to [the Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#).

Others have observed that food science can go only so far in the quest to make "junk food" nutritious. A [2014 study](#), published in the journal Public Health Nutrition, found that even the healthiest options at fast-food chains were so-so at best.

"McDonald's is faced with consumer demand for healthier kids' foods, but it's

hard to convert junk foods to health foods in any meaningful way,” said Marion Nestle, a professor of food studies and nutrition at New York University. “The approach here is tweaking.”

Still, argues Wechsler, it would be a mistake to “let perfect be the enemy of good.” He acknowledges he would like to see more changes at McDonald's — such as offering customers in the United States the full array of fruits and vegetables that it sells in other parts of the world.

Until then, however, Wechsler said the improvements to McDonald's Happy Meals constitute “real change”: a small shift that, at scale, could make a big difference in what many people eat.

“This is going to lead to a reduction in the calories, sodium, sugar and saturated fat that countless kids around the world consume,” he said. “Is there more room for improvement? Sure. But this is important progress.”

*Correction: This post initially misstated the new juice brand in McDonald's Happy Meals. It is Honest Kids, not Just Kids.*

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[How to fix the American diet, according to the man who popularized the term 'junk food'](#)

[Why 7-Eleven, inventor of the Slurpee, is now all about cold-pressed organic juice](#)