

Heart group's approval of fast food meals angers critics, who say it is "a sales ploy"

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Australians eating at any of the 750 McDonald's outlets across the country can now choose from a range of nine meal combinations that have been given a tick of approval by the National Heart Foundation.

McDonald's and the foundation say that the new meals will give consumers healthier choices, but some public health experts and nutritionists fear that the deal may encourage consumption of fast food and add to public confusion about mixed nutritional messages.

The meals, available since 28 February, have been reformulated to have less salt, saturated fat, trans fats, and energy, as well as more vegetables, than standard McDonald's fare.

One such meal comprises the McChicken burger, salad and Italian dressing, and water. It has 48% fewer kilojoules, 49% less saturated fat, 9% less salt, and an extra 1.5 servings of vegetables than a meal of McChicken burger, fries, and coke. McDonald's says that it is cheaper to buy the meal combinations approved by the foundation than to buy the individual items separately.

Susan Anderson, national manager of the foundation's "tick food" information programme, said that as well as improving the choices for the one million Australians who eat at McDonald's each day, the programme is likely to encourage other fast food outlets to provide healthier options. The foundation is maintaining its recommendation that people should not have takeaway food more than once a week.

But Mike Daube, Western Australian president of the National Heart Foundation and a national board member and professor of

HOW DO THE TICK MEALS COMPARE?

Tick approved McDonald's meal versus Popular McDonald's medium meal*	DIFFERENCE			
	kj	Saturated fat (g)	Salt (mg)	Vegetables (1 serving = 75g)
McChicken Burger, salad, Italian dressing, and water versus McChicken Burger, fries, and coke	Down 48%	Down 49%	Down 9%	Added 1.5 servings
3 nuggets, sweet & sour sauce, salad, Italian dressing, and OJ versus 3 nuggets with BBQ sauce, fries, and coke	Down 65%	Down 69%	Down 20%	Added 1.5 servings
Hamburger, salad, Italian dressing, and OJ versus Hamburger, fries, and coke	Down 61%	Down 37%	Down 10%	Added 1.5 servings
Thai Chicken Deli Choice Roll, apple, and water versus Thai Chicken Deli Choice Roll, fries, and coke	Down 46%	Down 72%	Down 38%	Increased to 1 serving

*As at June 2006; OJ = orange juice

health policy at Curtin University in Perth, has expressed "serious concerns." Professor Daube, who has been pushing for a tax on junk foods, said that he was speaking in a private capacity and not on behalf of the foundation.

"My concerns are the possible impact on our reputation, any prospect that it may be used to promote McDonald's more broadly, and the use that McDonald's and others may make of it to prevent curbs on their marketing," he said.

Since the tick programme began in 1989, more than 1200 food products have been accredited after being independently tested to ensure that they meet the foundation's nutrition standards.

McDonald's is only the second company to join the programme since it was extended last year to include meals eaten out. It paid the foundation \$A330 000 (£133 000; €195 000; \$256 000) to join the programme for 12 months, covering the cost of random audits. On average, two McDonald's outlets will face unannounced audits every week.

Ms Anderson said McDonald's deserved credit for submitting itself to an independent evaluation and for making "some fairly significant changes to their procedures and ingredients."

She said, "The only business we may end up driving to McDonald's are those people looking for healthier options."

Some public health experts have welcomed the move as a pragmatic attempt to engage with an industry that is often

blamed for contributing to Australia's growing weight problem, but others believe that it is a clever corporate move to reposition the McDonald's brand in the wake of the damning documentary film *Super Size Me*.

Rosemary Stanton, a prominent nutritionist and longstanding critic of the tick programme, said that the history of new food products showed that the programme was more likely to increase McDonald's total sales rather than encourage existing customers to buy the healthier products. "I see the

tick as overwhelmingly a marketing ploy," she said.

Marion Nestle, professor of nutrition, food studies, and public health at New York University, was similarly sceptical: "I am not aware of research demonstrating that these programmes help people eat more healthfully. On the other hand, substantial research demonstrates that ticks and other health labels increase product sales."

Tim Gill, codirector of the New South Wales Centre for Public Health Nutrition at the University of Sydney, said it was crucial that the programme's impact on McDonald's total sales was evaluated and made public. "You've got to give some credit to McDonald's that they've made some steps in the right direction, but to me the risk of confusion as to what should be considered appropriate food choices from this message is enormous," he said.

Melissa Sweet is a freelance health writer in New South Wales. In 1999 she contributed articles to a history of the National Heart Foundation.

