

As Younger Adults Cut Back Fast Food's Grip on American Diets Weakens

A recent report from the National Center for Health Statistics used NHANES data to estimate the share of daily calories from [fast food](#) among American adults.

One-third of adults ate fast food on a given day. About 11.7% of daily [calories](#) came from fast food. Intake has decreased since the 2013–14 period.



Study

This study builds on earlier findings by examining the most recent NHANES data from 2021–2023, with a focus on the first [dietary](#) recall.

Although 24-hour recalls are known to involve underreporting, they remain a useful method for assessing population [dietary patterns](#). The percentage of fast-food intake in total calories helps reduce reporting bias.

Researchers aimed to determine the number of adults who consume fast food on a given day, the percentage of their total calorie intake it represents, and whether differences exist by age, sex, education, and [weight](#).

Additionally, the study compared current consumption levels with past survey cycles (2013–14, 2015–16, and 2017–20) to assess long-term trends. Due to the [coronavirus disease 2019](#) (COVID-19) pandemic, data collection was paused in 2020 and later resumed in 2021, with some methodological changes, including dietary interviews conducted by phone instead of in person.

[Statistical analyses](#) incorporated sample weights to adjust for selection probability, nonresponse, and interview timing. Variance was estimated using the Taylor series linearization method, subgroup comparisons were tested with Student's t-statistics, and linear regression models were used to assess trends across cycles.

Results

During August 2021 to August 2023, 32% of U.S. adults aged 20 and older [consumed fast food](#) on a given day.

Of all adults, 11.4% consumed more than 0% but less than 25% of their daily calories from fast food, 12.0% got 25–50%, and 8.6% got more than half of their calories from it. On average, fast food contributed 11.7% of adults' daily [caloric intake](#).

[Consumption](#) decreased with age: Adults aged 20–39 obtained 15.2% of calories from fast food, compared to 11.9% among those aged 40–59, and 7.6% among those 60 and older.

There were no significant differences between men and women. [Education](#) was linked to intake; those with some college education consumed a higher percentage of calories from fast food (13.4%) than both high school graduates (11.2%) and those with a bachelor's degree or higher (10.8%). However, this difference was not observed among adults aged 40–59, for whom no significant education-related differences were found.

Weight status also mattered: adults with obesity consumed the highest share of calories from fast food (13.7%), compared with 10.8% in overweight adults and 9.8% in those with normal weight. Among 20–39-year-olds specifically, overweight adults consumed significantly less than those with [obesity](#).

Over time, [fast-food intake](#) declined. Overall, the percentage of daily calories from fat dropped from 14.1% in 2013–2014 to 11.7% in 2021–2023, a decline primarily driven by younger adults (from 19.0% to 15.2%), while no significant changes were observed for older adults.

Conclusion

Between August 2021 and August 2023, about one-third of U.S. adults aged 20 and older [consumed fast food](#) on a given day. On average, fast food accounted for 11.7% of daily calories, showing a decline from 14.1% in 2013–14 and approaching the 11.3% level previously reported in 2007–2010.

Patterns of consumption varied: Younger adults obtained a higher share of their calories from fast food, while intake declined with age. Adults with obesity consumed the greatest proportion, compared to those with normal or [overweight status](#).

Education also played a role, as those with some [college education](#) consumed more fast-food calories than either high school graduates or college degree holders, except among individuals aged 40–59 years, where no significant differences were observed. No significant differences were observed between men and women.

Fast-food consumption remains a concern because it contributes to higher intake of calories, fat, sodium, and sugar, while reducing the intake of beneficial [nutrients](#) such as fiber, calcium, and whole grains.

Source:

<https://www.news-medical.net/news/20250911/Fast-food-e28099s-grip-on-American-diets-weakens-as-younger-adults-cut-back.aspx>