

# 30 Day McDiet: Results Are In

By ACSH Staff — September 9, 2004

Over the past few months I've written several [short](#) <sup>[1]</sup> commentaries on Morgan Spurlock's movie, "Super Size Me" -- the documentary about how Mr. Spurlock ate (or rather overate) at McDonald's for 30 days and gained upwards of 25 pounds. I mentioned a couple of people who also ate at McDonald's restaurants for 30 days, with very different results -- Ms. Soso Whaley and Mr. Chazz Weaver. Both of these folks managed, on their strictly fast food diets, to lose weight and improve some of their health-related characteristics like blood cholesterol levels.

But I was curious, given that "Super Size Me" demonizes fast food to the nth degree, about how these folks' diets stacked up compared to the guidelines espoused by most mainstream nutrition groups. For example, the last USDA "Dietary Guidelines for Americans" suggests that people consume only 30 percent of their calories from fat, and only 10 percent from saturated fat. In addition, the *Dietary Reference Intakes* from the Food and Nutrition Board of the National Academy of Sciences suggest appropriate levels of various vitamins and minerals. So, with their permission, and information from McDonald's, we tallied all the foods they chose to eat over their 30 day McDonald's periods, and calculated the daily average intake of a number of nutrients. I was not necessarily expecting perfect agreement with any of these guides because neither Ms. Whaley nor Mr. Wheeler is a trained nutritionist, nor did they consult any nutritionists during their McDonald's months; I just wanted to see how close two independent adults would come to the recommended dietary profiles for their respective ages and genders.

Here's the rundown on our McDieters' diets.

Ms. Whaley, true to her plan, kept her calories low -- on average she consumed 1809 calories per day -- resulting in a weight loss of ten pounds over the course of 30 days. To maintain her starting weight, she would have had to consume about 2000-2200 calories per day. Her nutrient intake was higher in fat than is usually recommended -- about 39% of her calories came from fat (recommended range is 20-35%). Her saturated fat intake was also a bit high -- 13% rather than the recommended 10%. She consumed about 46% of her calories from carbohydrates -- the lower edge of what the guidelines suggest. Her protein intake was about 16% of calories, which is in the suggested range for adults her age. Ms. Whaley's average cholesterol intake was somewhat over the upper limit -- 338 milligrams instead of 300 or less. Her consumption of dietary fiber was, however, only about 8 grams per day -- less than one-third of the recommended 25 grams.

She did better on meeting recommendations for a number of vitamins and minerals, however. Her intake of vitamins A, B6, B12, C, niacin, and riboflavin all exceeded 100 percent of the recommended amounts. She did fall a little short with respect to thiamin (87% of suggested amount). An important deficit was the B vitamin folic acid: Ms. Whaley only consumed about 50% of the recommended 400 micrograms/day.

The adequacy of Ms. Whaley's mineral consumption varied. Her intake of calcium, important for bone strength, was 96% of the recommended 1000 milligrams -- better than that most American women. But her intake of several other minerals -- iodine, magnesium, potassium, selenium and zinc, was less than optimal -- anywhere from 15 to 60 percent of recommended values. Her iron intake, too, was low -- only 49% of the current RDA. Ms. Whaley's sodium intake was about twice the recommended level -- 213% to be exact.

In contrast to Ms. Whaley, Mr. Weaver made no attempt to restrict his calories (he said he was not trying to lose weight). Indeed, he sometimes consumed 4 or 5 substantial meals per day during his McDonald's month. On average, he took in 4321 calories per day (more than Morgan Spurlock claims to have eaten, according to his movie). It's worth mentioning again that Mr. Weaver, a fitness aficionado and weight lifter, spent over an hour a day working out at his gym. Since he lost eight pounds during the month, he obviously used up more calories than he consumed.

Like Soso Whaley, Chazz Weaver over-consumed fat, compared to the Dietary Guidelines (30%). His average total fat intake was 44% of calories, and 14% of his caloric intake came from saturated fat (4% greater than suggested level). Carbohydrates supplied about 39% of his calories, somewhat less than the 35% that is usually recommended as a minimum. His cholesterol intake was very high -- over 1200 milligrams per day, four times the recommended level. One deficit was dietary fiber: Mr. Weaver consumed about 17 grams per day, which was only 69% of the recommended minimum of 25 grams.

Mr. Weaver's consumption of vitamins was well over recommended amounts -- no problems there. They varied from 111% of the RDA for vitamin C to 580% of that for vitamin B6. And his intake of most minerals was also well over the recommended amounts. An exception was potassium, an important electrolyte. On average he consumed only 87% of the recommended 4700 milligrams per day. His sodium intake was very high -- over 8300 milligrams per day, compared to a recommended 1500 milligrams.

So the lowdown on our McDieters' diets: they could have been better, but they weren't awful. Ms. Whaley's task was the harder one, and one that should be brought to the attention of other dieters. A person who limits caloric intake has to pay particular attention to food selection in order to obtain all the necessary nutrients (or take supplements). Could she have avoided the deficits we found while eating at McDonald's? To some extent, yes. She could have consumed more fiber by eating salads more frequently; that would also have helped her get more folate. (This would be particularly important for a woman during child-bearing years, since adequate folate can help protect against some types of birth defects.) Her low intake of iron might have been helped by more meat and iron-fortified grain products, also by more eggs. Fat intake would drop with consumption of nonfat dairy products. More potassium could be obtained from increasing orange juice consumption (also by eating other fruit sources like bananas -- not served at McDonald's, to

my knowledge), and even eating more French fries.

Much of the high sodium consumption came from meat-related dishes, so increasing these to get more iron would not lower the sodium intake unless she ordered her burgers without pickles and other high-sodium condiments, and was able to get her chicken without marinade. Cheese also can be a source of sodium -- on cheeseburgers or on salads; it's also a source of calcium, so it would be a tricky balancing act. She could also reduce sodium by substituting nonfat milk for cheese. She could have bolstered her magnesium intake with foods like seeds, nuts, legumes and more dark green vegetables. Her low fiber intake could have been increased with more salads and whole grain products, and her iodine deficit by consumption of seafoods and iodized salt. This type of trading of nutrient sources underlines the point of why it is important to obtain one's foods from a variety of places -- no one venue can be counted on to provide enough variety for a nutritionally complete diet day after day after day.

But Ms. Whaley did accomplish her aim -- over the course of the 30 days she lost 10 pounds. In addition, her levels of blood lipids (fats) improved in some areas (see Table 1 below). Although her HDL cholesterol didn't increase as one might hope, her level of LDL ("bad" cholesterol) decreased by 23%, and her total cholesterol by 17%. More exercise might have helped increase her HDL level. Her blood pressure also decreased from a range that would be considered "prehypertension," to one close to normal (the systolic, or upper number should be 120 or less, while the diastolic or lower number is well within normal limits.) Ms. Whaley's triglycerides were well within the normal range both before and after her McDiet.

Table 1. **Soso Whaley's Blood Chemistry Before and After McDiet.**

PARAMETER	BEFORE McDIET	AFTER McDIET	POST-DIET Evaluation (Desirable or optimal levels)	
Total Cholesterol*	237 mg/dl	197mg/dl	Satisfactory (<200 is desirable)	
LDL ("Bad") *Cholesterol	172 mg	133 mg/dl	Good (<100 is optimal)	
HDL ("Good") *Cholesterol	45 mg/dl	41mg/dl	Low (>50 for women desirable)	
Total:HDL Cholesterol Ratio~	5.3	4.8	OK (less than 5 desirable, 3.5 optimal)~	
Triglycerides	71 mg/dl	72 mg/dl	Normal (less than 150)	
Blood Pressure**	132/78	128/62	Normal	

\* Values from [American Heart Association](#) [2]

\*\* Values from [National Heart Lung and Blood Institute](#) [3]

~Values for cholesterol ratio from [American Heart Association](#) [4]

Mr. Weaver's diet had plenty of pretty much everything, which isn't surprising considering his large caloric intake. He, too, could have benefited from more vegetable foods -- salads in particular to increase his fiber intake. His potassium intake could also be increased by greater consumption of vegetables and fruits. His cholesterol intake was very high -- this could have been lowered by eating fewer eggs. On many days his breakfasts included not only sandwiches that included eggs, but also a couple of side orders of scrambled eggs! (His complete diet is listed on his website at [www.truthinfitness.org](http://www.truthinfitness.org) [5]. But we must note here that Mr. Weaver's blood cholesterol profile actually improved while he did his McDieting -- this can be attributed to his very active lifestyle, weight loss, and/or the likelihood that he is not in that group of people whose blood cholesterol is affected by his dietary cholesterol intake. Mr. Weaver's cholesterol levels changed for the better over the course of his McDiet month. The results are in Table 2 below. HDL ("good") cholesterol improved by 80%, while his LDL ("bad") cholesterol decreased by 2 points; his total cholesterol increased slightly -- from 199 to 211, most of which was likely due to the increased HDL. His triglycerides (another type of fat in the blood) decreased by 42% (from 97 to 68). Blood cholesterol and triglyceride levels are measured in milligrams per 100 milliliters of blood (mg/dl). When he began the month, Mr. Weaver weighed 222 pounds; 30 days later he weighed 214 pounds. His blood pressure increased slightly -- just barely putting him in the range that might be considered to lead to hypertension (over 120/80) -- if he is sensitive to sodium, he might try reducing his salt intake to see if his blood pressure returned to his normal level.

Table 2. **Chazz Weaver's Blood Chemistry Before and After his McDiet.**

PARAMETER	BEFORE McDIET	AFTER McDIET	POST-DIET Evaluation* (Desirable or optimal levels)
Total Cholesterol	199 mg/dl	211 mg/dl	Borderline high (<200 is desirable)
LDL ("Bad") Cholesterol	144 mg/dl	142 mg/dl	Borderline high (<100 is optimal)
HDL ("Good") Cholesterol	25 mg/dl	45 mg/dl	Average (>40 for men)
Total:HDL Cholesterol Ratio~	7.96	4.7	OK (Less than 5 desirable, 3.5 optimal)
Triglycerides	97 mg/dl	68 mg/dl	Normal (less than 150)
Blood Pressure	111/71	121/81	"prehypertension"***

\* Values from [American Heart Association](#) [2]

\*\* <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/hbp/hbp/whathbp.htm> [3]

In summary, neither of our McDieters were exactly on target with respect to the distribution of calories from fat, saturated fat, or with respect to their vitamin and mineral intake. Some of their eating errors could have been corrected by making different choices among those offered at McDonald's restaurants -- for example, more salads, fewer egg products, low or nonfat dairy products. Their dietary issues simply underscore the difficulty of obtaining appropriate amounts of nutrients when one either restricts calorie intake or the variety of eating choices. Happily, the health of neither one seems to have suffered in the least, and most indicators of health actually improved, in direct contradiction to Morgan Spurlock's assertions that fast food is bad and bad for you.

Further, this analysis lends even more credence to the importance of considering the overall lifestyle when evaluating the appropriateness of anyone's food choices. In spite of the fact that he ate very large amounts of cholesterol and calories, Mr. Weaver's cholesterol profile improved, and he actually lost weight -- most likely because he offset these "taboos" with frequent vigorous exercise. Ms. Whaley lost the weight she wanted to lose and also improved her cholesterol level. The fact that neither of these "McDieters" met all the nutritional guidelines underscores the importance of education about making appropriate food choices. Pointing the finger of blame at particular foods or food venues distracts us from taking the responsibility of learning what we need to know to make those choices.

*This article was written with the assistance of Aubrey Stimola and appeared on <http://techcentralstation.com> [6] .*

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