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Fast-food market hustles to get in shape

By Bruce Horovitz, USA TODAY

Nutrition has emerged as the fast-food industry's hottest buzzword in decades.

Spurred by consumer demand and a continuing fear of legislation and new lawsuits, many of the biggest names in the \$105 billion industry continue to churn out improved nutritional offerings.

"It's a steamroller," says Frank Guidara, CEO of Au Bon Pain. "The fast-food giants are changing their way of doing things."

•**Burger King** soon will announce plans to sell a new line of chicken sandwiches with just 5 grams of fat. Fire Grilled Chicken Baguette sandwiches will be available at Burger Kings nationwide by the end of September, says Rob Doughty, a company spokesman. The sandwiches will sell for \$2.89.

•**Wendy's** on Monday said it will place references on menu boards in the USA and Canada to its revised nutritional brochure and updated nutritional information on its Web site.

The company's carryout bags and tray liners also will tout the nutritional resources. Tom Mueller, president of Wendy's North America, says the chain is "significantly enhancing communications" about nutrition.

•**McDonald's** is testing a Happy Meal for adults called "Go Active." At \$4.99, it consists of an entrée salad, a bottle of water, a pedometer that measures distance walked and a booklet on the benefits of walking.

•**Au Bon Pain** has installed nutritional information kiosks in all of its 130 company-owned stores. It also plans to place them in the 100 franchise stores.

But Guidara, the CEO, says the kiosks have been in the works for two years — long before the industry's current nutrition binge began. The kiosks feature computers that consumers can use to find detailed nutritional information on every food item sold at Au Bon Pain.

Experts say there's no end in sight to the fast-food industry's new push to look, feel and sound better-for-you.

"Consumers are aware that many fast-food items are not good for them," says Ron Santibanez, a restaurant consultant in Los Angeles. "But it's striking to see this much emphasis on nutrition."

Yet it may not be fast enough.

Worries about fatty foods are hurting fast-food sales and could result in credit rating downgrades if demand doesn't pick up, Standard & Poor's said Monday. "The sector was late in recognizing that consumers' tastes had changed," S&P said. "The core customer (aged 18 to 35) is opting for healthier food."

Not all nutritionists are convinced the current onslaught will last. "It's wonderful that they're doing this," says Lynn Hinderliter, a certified nutritionist in Macomb, Ill. "But if their sales fall, they'll all reverse course."

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