

COVID Made McDonald's a Public Health Savior

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✓ Fact Checked

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) enlisted McDonald's to promote its COVID-19 public health education campaign
- › McDonald's produces and promotes some of the unhealthiest ultraprocessed food on the planet – food that likely played a role in making COVID-19 outcomes worse
- › The joint initiative debuted May 2021 and included use of a McDonald's billboard in Times Square to promote COVID-19 shots, and HHS promotional material on its hot McCafé cups and McDelivery seal stickers
- › The packaging including imaging and text promoting HHS' We Can Do This initiative, which is intended to "increase confidence in COVID-19 vaccines and reinforce basic prevention measures"
- › By naming McDonald's and other junk food giants as partners in the fight against a pandemic, health officials further normalized the consumption of foods that lead to chronic disease and premature death

McDonald's and "public health" don't even belong in the same sentence, but this didn't stop the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) from enlisting the fast food giant to promote its COVID-19 public health education campaign.

HHS, whose stated goal is to "enhance the health and well-being of all Americans,"¹ partnered not with a health food company, fitness outlet or even a hospital or medical facility but, rather, McDonald's, which produces and promotes some of the unhealthiest

ultraprocessed food on the planet – food that likely played a role in making COVID-19 outcomes worse.

Nonetheless, it was positioned as a tool for public health and used as part of the widespread propaganda to get more people injected with COVID-19 shots.

McDonald's Provides 'Trusted' Information on COVID-19

In 2021, the Biden Administration called for **COVID "misinformants,"** including yours truly, to be removed from all social media platforms, censoring the ability to provide useful and truthful COVID-19 information. The irony of the Biden Administration then partnering, that same year, with McDonald's to "provide trusted, independent information on COVID-19 vaccines"² is palpable.

The joint initiative debuted May 2021 and included use of a McDonald's billboard in Times Square to promote COVID-19 shots. That July, McDonald's added promotional material leading customers to vaccines.gov to its hot McCafé cups and McDelivery seal stickers.

The packaging including imaging and text promoting HHS' We Can Do This initiative, which is intended to "increase confidence in COVID-19 vaccines and reinforce basic prevention measures."³

Included prominently on its We Can Do This webpage are recommendations on COVID-19 shots for young children and tools to address "vaccine misconceptions," including premade graphics to share on social media and a community toolkit to shutdown "misinformation."⁴ In a press release, McDonald's proudly promoted its new role as a public health educator:⁵

"The initiative will begin ... with the debut of COVID-19 vaccine information from trusted third parties on McDonald's billboard in Times Square. Starting in July, McDonald's hot McCafé® cups and McDelivery® seal stickers will lead customers to vaccines.gov, where they can learn more about how they can

protect themselves and the people they love from COVID-19, as well as where to find vaccine appointments near them.

The new packaging and ads feature art from the national We Can Do This campaign, setting the campaign's slogan against a map of the United States. McDonald's is committed to making helpful information accessible to our customers, who are encouraged to share the campaign using #WeCanDoThis to inspire others to learn more about what they can do to help end the pandemic."

McDonald's Hosts Pop-Up Shot Clinics

Does getting a medical procedure at a fast-food restaurant seem strange to you? It didn't bother the California Department of Health, which also teamed up with McDonald's to offer pop-up COVID-19 shot clinics at more than 70 locations in the state. "People who receive a vaccine at McDonald's will also get a coupon for one free menu item as a thank you for doing their part," CBS News reported.⁶

It's unclear how many people were lured in with the promise of free French fries, but when San Bernardino County's mobile vaccine unit parked its truck outside a McDonald's, it only had 22 takers in a four-hour span.

"Even at a fast-food restaurant, pop-up clinics see slow traffic," California Healthline reported in July 2021. The "people who got vaccinated that day — in addition to the scores of others who drove by or waited in the McDonald's drive-thru line without seeking a shot — offer a snapshot of California's stalling vaccination effort."⁷

At the time, California had funded 155 shot clinics at more than 80 McDonald's restaurants — a questionable use of taxpayer dollars. As noted by California Healthline:⁸

"The pop-ups require significant resources and are showing diminishing returns. About 2,500 doses have been administered at the McDonald's clinics so far — an average of 16 shots per event. The California Department of Public Health declined to say how much these events cost, saying it varies."

Doughnuts, Marijuana Offered in Exchange for Shots

It's not only McDonald's that became an icon for public health during the pandemic. Doughnut maker Krispy Kreme also announced March, 22 2021, that anyone who received at least one Moderna, Pfizer or Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 shot could get a free doughnut at any U.S. store.

Anyone who showed a COVID-19 vaccination card was eligible for the promotion and could get one free doughnut daily through the remainder of 2021.⁹

Washington state took a different approach, with its Liquor and Cannabis Board offering a "Joints for Jabs" program. It ran COVID-19 shot clinics at state-licensed dispensaries and gave individuals who received a shot a pre-rolled joint for taking part.¹⁰ The state also offered other incentives for residents to get injected, including free sports tickets and entries into a \$1 million lottery.

Arizona and Washington, D.C., also gave out free joints and marijuana edibles to individuals who showed proof of getting a COVID-19 shot.¹¹ This type of glamorization of fast food and other perks to promote COVID-19 shots isn't unique to the U.S., either.

At one point during the pandemic, Royal Free Hospital, which is part of the Royal Free London NHS Foundation Trust, tweeted the following along with a photo showing dozens of doughnut boxes:¹²

"You guys at @krispykremeUK Enfield sure know how to put a smile on our staff's faces! 1,500 doughnuts delivered to our staff at Barnet Hospital- #glazeamaze."

"I've got nothing against people having a treat," cardiologist Dr. Aseem Malhotra said. "But hospitals shouldn't be promoting ... and essentially advertising, the fact that we are giving 1,000 free Krispy Kreme doughnuts to nurses in the middle of the pandemic. I don't think that was very productive considering what we know about the influence on COVID."¹³

That hospitals were promoting junk food and junk food companies instead of healthy food is reminiscent of Big Tobacco's tactics, which not only suppressed the harmful effects of cigarettes but also recruited doctors to promote them, using slogans such as, "More Doctors Smoke Camels Than Any Other Cigarette."

"We see the same tactics repeating themselves," Malhotra continued. "What Krispy Kreme is doing is using the NHS as a branding opportunity for what are essentially addictive, toxic foods that should just be treats but not part of the regular diet."¹⁴

Junk Food Companies Made COVID Worse

The junk food industry has succeeded in making ultraprocessed foods a mainstay of modern-day life, and in so doing created an epidemic of chronic diseases and obesity that raised mortality rates from COVID-19.¹⁵ So naming them as "partners" in the fight against COVID-19 is not only insulting but misleading.

In one study, more than 99% of fatalities from COVID-19 occurred among people who had underlying medical conditions.¹⁶ Among the fatalities, 76.1% had high blood pressure, 35.5% had diabetes and 33% had heart disease.¹⁷

Another study revealed that among 18- to 49-year-olds hospitalized due to COVID-19, obesity was the most prevalent underlying condition.¹⁸ Chronic conditions like Type 2 diabetes, heart disease and obesity have a lot in common, including the fact that they're often fueled by poor diet.

Ultraprocessed foods, junk foods and soft drinks are key culprits in the rise of such chronic diseases, and therefore had a key role to play in COVID-19 deaths. Yet, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, multinational food corporations became "partners" with health officials in charge of public policy.

Why Are Officials Promoting Foods That Cause Early Death?

By naming McDonald's and Krispy Kreme as partners in the fight against a pandemic, health officials further normalized the consumption of foods that lead to chronic disease and premature death. It's almost as if they want you to get sick and unhealthy.

Researchers with the University of São Paulo in Brazil found that about 57,000 premature deaths in the country were due to the consumption of ultraprocessed foods, which amounted to 10.5% of all-cause premature deaths,¹⁹ among adults aged 30 to 69. In Brazilian adults, ultraprocessed foods make up 13% to 21% of total energy intake.

But among Americans, ultraprocessed foods make up about 57% of daily calories, on average, leading the researchers to suggest premature deaths linked to the foods are likely even greater in the U.S.²⁰ In Brazil, meanwhile, the study found that if the contribution of ultraprocessed foods to total caloric intake was reduced by 10% to 50%, anywhere from 5,900 to 29,300 deaths could be prevented, annually.²¹

Further, the researchers estimated that if ultraprocessed foods made up less than 23% of adults' daily calories, about 20,000 premature deaths could be prevented each year.²² Meanwhile, we have HHS in the U.S. using McDonald's to promote its public health propaganda.

In case you needed more reason to avoid ultraprocessed foods, even if HHS suggests otherwise, researchers from Imperial College London's School of Public Health found these cheap convenience foods are linked to an increased risk of developing and dying from cancer.²³

Overall, consuming more ultraprocessed foods was linked with a greater risk of developing any cancer, as well as ovarian and brain cancers specifically.²⁴ In another study, men who consumed the most ultraprocessed foods had a 29% higher risk of developing colorectal cancer than those who consumed the least.²⁵

The health risks of ultraprocessed foods are so concerning that Kiara Chang of Imperial College London's School of Public Health called for "clear front of pack" warning labels to be added to their packaging so consumers can make informed dietary decisions²⁶ — but that would require taking up valuable advertising space from HHS.

Avoid Selling Your Health Out to McDonald's

While HHS clearly sold out to McDonald's, you can avoid making the same mistake with your health. Ultraprocessed foods have no place in a healthy diet – and certainly no place in any public health campaign. One of the primary toxic ingredients in fast foods is the omega-6 fatty acid linoleic acid (LA),²⁷ which is found in the seed oils common in most of these products.

As Americans consumed greater amounts of seed oils high in LA, there was an increase in the concentration of LA in subcutaneous fat tissue, which correlates with an increase in the prevalence of asthma, obesity and diabetes.²⁸ So, if you're looking for a place to start improving your health, start with removing seed oils, which means avoiding junk foods, fast foods, eating at most all restaurants, and most packaged items in your grocery store.

By giving up this ultraprocessed junk, you'll make room in your diet to add healthy whole foods that will help your body heal, stay well and fight off infectious diseases like COVID-19.

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