Is fast food good for you?

Lead-in

In the United States, fast food is incredibly popular. American fast-food chains, such as McDonald's, Wendy's, Kentucky Fried Chicken and Burger King, are among the best-known companies in the world. But is American fast food good for you? What do you think? Discuss the vocabulary and the questions with a partner.

1 Which of these are good for you, and which bad? Which of these things do you think fast food is full of?

cholesterol	protein	salt	fat	vitamins	minerals

2 Put these adjectives in order from very thin to very fat. If you eat too much fast food, which of these are you likely to become?

obese	skinny	fat	slim	overweight

3 Fast food chains advertise their products very aggressively. Do you think they should take some responsibility if people become overweight as a result of eating their products?

Reading 1

You are going to read a newspaper article about an American who has taken major fast food chains to court, arguing that they are responsible for making him obese.

Read the passage and decide which of the sentences below are true and which are false.

1 Caesar Barber blames fast food chains for his obesity. ☐
2 He did not know that fast food was fattening. ☐
3 He started eating fast food in the 1950s. ☐
4 He stopped eating fast food as soon as he had problems with his health. ☐
5 Many people think he is merely trying to make money – they think he must have known that fast food was fattening. ☐
6 Barber wants fast food chains to be more honest about the content of their food in their advertising. ☐
7 Doctors don't think fast food is particularly bad for your health.   ` ☐

Fast-food chains face obesity lawsuit

Man claims he was misled over nutritional content of meals
By Sharon Krum

If Caesar Barber dreamed of winning fame, he probably didn't think it would be due to his obesity. But, since the 120kg maintenance worker filed a lawsuit against McDonald's, Wendy's, Kentucky Fried Chicken and Burger King last month - seeking damages for selling him food that made him obese - Barber's 15 minutes of fame are proving as painful as the two heart attacks he has already had. "Does anyone really believe that Mr Barber was too dumb to know that eating saturated fat was less healthy than having, say, a fruit dish or a chef salad?" said Steve Dasbach, who is the executive director of the Libertarian party.

Barber says that he was in the dark about the nutritional content of the fast food he was eating up to five times a week from the 50s onwards. Incredibly, he didn't stop gobbling burgers and salty fries after he had his first heart attack in 1996. He is now a diabetic with high blood pressure.

In his lawsuit - the first of its kind in the United States - he contends that deceptive advertising misled him about the nutritional value of the food, until a doctor pointed it out. "Those people in the advertisements don't tell you what's in the food," he says. "Now I'm obese. The fast-food industry has ruined my life. They said 100% beef. I thought that meant it was good for you." Attacks on Barber's character and perceived IQ became a sport in the US media. Barber wasn't stupid, columnists and radio hosts joked, just out to make money by failing to take responsibility for his diet. More than 75 million Americans eat fast food every day. But who, the journalists asked, doesn't know that too much will make you overweight? "Mr Barber honestly didn't know what the dangers were when he started eating fast food in the 50s," says his lawyer, Samuel Hirsch. "The fast-food chains made no effort then, and little today, to inform consumers about the dangerously high fat, cholesterol or salt content of their food." Hirsch says that his client, who has now gone into hiding, is not trying to make money but to get the chains to inform customers that their food is guilty of expanding their waistlines. However, not everyone in the US thinks Barber's case is a joke. The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine applauded the lawsuit.

The committee's research coordinator, Brie Turner-McGrivey, says that whether Barber wins or loses, the hype surrounding the case has been good for doctors, spotlighting America's obesity epidemic and the role that fast food plays in it.

The Guardian Weekly 12-9-2002, page 21

Reading 2

Read the passage again and answer the questions. Discuss them with a partner.

What exactly is Caesar Barber's case against the fast food chains?
Do you think Caesar is really dumb or really clever?
Why is the Physicians Committee pleased that the case has gone to court?

Vocabulary in context

The phrases below are all connected with the law. Find them in the passage, and match them to the best definition on the right.

file a lawsuit	try to get money
seek damages	make people believe the wrong thing
contend	win/lose an argument in court
mislead	take somebody to court
win/lose a case	argue

Follow-up

American fast food is popular all over the world. Discuss these questions with your partner.

1   Do you often eat food from American fast food chains? What is your favorite fast food?

2   Do you think fast food is bad for you? Do you try to avoid eating too much? If you have children, do you restrict how much they are allowed to eat?

3   Do you think fast food chains have a responsibility to make their products healthy and non-fattening, and to advertise them honestly, or do you think it is our responsibility as consumers to decide whether to eat them or not?

4   Do you think Mr Barber should win his lawsuit?