

Healthy Choices when Eating Out



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SCIENCES

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Facts

Americans are eating out more than ever. According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Americans spend about 46 percent of their food budget on food prepared away from home and eat 32 percent of their calories from restaurant or takeout foods. Food is available almost any time and anywhere today, encouraging consumers to eat more food and to eat more frequently.

More than 65 percent of Americans are overweight or obese, according to statistics available through the National Institutes of Health. Weight and obesity problems are in part due to the increasing frequency of eating out. Americans generally eat more when eating out, and children eat almost twice as many calories when they eat a meal at a restaurant as at home.

Dashboard dining – eating in the car – has become common. One in every four restaurant meals is ordered from a vehicle. Foods ordered most often are hamburgers (37 percent), sandwiches (15 percent), pizza (9 percent) and Mexican food (6 percent).

From Automat to drive-up to 'fast casual'

In 1912, the first Automat offered prepared foods chosen through glass windows in coin-operated vending machines. Americans have been choosing fast food ever since. The second fast-food restaurant to open in the United States has Kansas roots: White Castle restaurant opened in Topeka in 1921, serving hamburgers for 5 cents each. It was the first restaurant to allow customers to watch the food being prepared.

A new type of dining, known as “fast casual,” is challenging fast food’s popularity. This trend combines quick service and moderate price with a more varied and upscale menu. Chain restaurants are following this trend, offering pasta dishes, steaks and sandwiches on their menus.

Research has shown that the more often a person eats out, the more body fat he or she has. Super-sized portions, added salt and sugar, thick sauces, deep-fried preparation methods and rich desserts tempt diners to add calories. Menus offering low-fat fruit or vegetable dishes are rare. Dairy products are often in the form of ice cream mixtures. Whole-grain breads are not common.

How much is enough?

Societal attitudes about dining out might differ from those about eating at home. Eating out is sometimes viewed as a special occasion, perhaps “justifying” food choices that are higher in calories than those consumed at home. Restaurants have found that – without greatly increasing their costs – they can offer more food and make customers feel they are getting a good value. Accordingly, consumers have become confused about serving and portion sizes.

A “portion” is how much food you choose to eat, whether in a restaurant, from a package, or in your own kitchen. A “serving” is a standard amount set by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (or sometimes in cookbooks or diet plans). Restaurant portion sizes may equal to two or three of the standard servings recommended by *MyPyramid* plan. (See www.mypyramid.gov.)

Fact Sheet

Strategies

The following strategies are aimed at making healthy choices when eating away from home.

Strategy #1: Plan before you eat

Call ahead and decide what to eat when you are not as hungry. Order before others in the group so you are not tempted to change your mind. Watch out for extras – beverages, appetizers, or bread and butter. Ask if a smaller portion – a child’s or senior’s meal – is available. When you are served, eat slowly, savor the food and pay attention to what you are eating. Stop when you begin to feel full.

Strategy #2: Have it ‘your way’

Look for menu descriptions that indicate the preparation method. Poached, grilled, broiled, stir-fried or blackened foods are generally prepared with less fat. Ask for one of those preparation methods for your meal, and find out what type of fat is used. Try to replace saturated fats and trans fats with unsaturated oils.

Foods made with light wine or a tomato-based sauce generally have less fat than those with cheese or white sauces. Choose low-fat or fat-free dressings or mayonnaise. Watch out for high-sodium foods – those that are pickled; smoked; in broth or *au jus*; or in cocktail, soy or teriyaki sauce.

Substitute vegetables for french fries, salad and low-fat dressing for coleslaw, or whole-grain for white bread. Have extras “on the side” or not at all. Butter, sour cream, mayonnaise, cheese, bacon or toppings enhance flavor but add fat and calories.

Strategy #3: Curb a ravenous appetite

“Saving up” for a special meal can result in overeating, so avoid feeling starved when you go out. Eat a light snack at home or munch on plain veggies to curb your appetite. Drink water with lemon while you wait.

Strategy #4: Share your food

Share an entrée: Most servings are large enough for two to enjoy. If not, add soup or salad. Think about choosing an appetizer as an alternative to a large entrée. Ask for extra plates and share a dessert around the table.

Strategy #5: Do a ‘to-go’ before the ‘to eat’

Ask for a “to-go” box when you order. When your meal comes, put half of it in the box before you start to eat. It is easier to divide then and removes the temptation to eat just a bit more.

Strategy #6: Pack it instead

If you often eat away from home, take home cooking with you. For quick lunches, divide leftovers into servings in packable containers. A low-calorie frozen meal, fruits and vegetables, or simple sandwich can make a light lunch. Watch serving sizes to avoid undoing your good idea.

Strategy #7: Add healthy foods to a meal

Order fresh fruit, juice, raw vegetables, salad with low-calorie dressing, or low-fat milk with your meal. Request soft, trans-fat-free margarine instead of butter.

Strategy #8: Know serving sizes

The *MyPyramid* food guidance system recommends amounts of food to eat each day, including recommended serving sizes. Comparisons can help visualize appropriate serving sizes.

- ▶ 1 ounce bread = CD case
- ▶ 1 medium fruit = tennis ball
- ▶ 1 ounce cheese = two dice
- ▶ 3 ounces meat, fish or poultry = cassette tape
- ▶ 2 tablespoons peanut butter = table-tennis ball
- ▶ ½ cup cooked pasta = computer mouse

Strategy #9: Don't drink dinner

Restaurants frequently offer “meal deals” that include a drink. A large soft drink or sweetened tea could have as many calories as the meal. Order a diet drink or plain tea sweetened with sugar substitute, if desired. Choose low-fat or skim milk. Water is the best – and least expensive – drink choice.

Tailor to your taste

Part of the fun of eating out is having an opportunity to taste new foods or savor old favorites. Consider the following strategies to avoid extra fat and calories and to keep from overeating at specialty restaurants.

Steak and Seafood

Choose grilled entrées, not fried. Order the smallest entrée or share one and split the baked potato. Request butter on the side, and limit added sauces. Baked beans or steamed vegetables are good side dish choices. Tossed salad with light dressing or dressing on the side is a lower-calorie choice than coleslaw.

Buffet

Look at the buffet first and plan your choices. Use a small plate and size portions accordingly. Fill three-fourths of the plate with vegetables and fruits. Take 1 or 2 tablespoons of choices, and sit away from the buffet area. Only take dessert after the meal is finished.

Deli

Choose mustard, vinegar and peppers to liven up your sandwich. Have baked chips instead of fried. Watch out for high-sodium pickles, olives, and smoked or cured meats. Ask for whole-grain bread.

Pizza

Start with a green salad. Stick with thin-crust pizza; avoid cheese-stuffed crust. Choose low-fat toppings such as pineapple, Canadian bacon, ham, grilled chicken, spinach, tomatoes, broccoli, mushrooms, onions and peppers. Avoid extra cheese.

Italian/Pasta

Share a meal or take some home. Select a marinara or other tomato-based sauce rather than an Alfredo sauce with cream, butter and cheese. Go light on bread with butter or olive oil. Choose seafood or chicken rather than meatballs or sausage.

Chinese

Look for dishes with vegetables. Request plain rice instead of fried. Replace egg rolls with steamed dumplings. Select chicken and seafood dishes rather than pork or duck. Won ton and hot-and-sour soups are lower in fat than others. Enjoy unsweetened green tea. Limit sweet-and-sour sauces and dishes made with nuts. Try sherbet, fruit or a fortune cookie for dessert.

Fast Food/Sandwiches

Order the regular, small or junior-size burger – not the double. Choose grilled or broiled meats. Use ketchup, mustard or barbecue sauce instead of mayonnaise or “special” sauce. Split a small order of french fries, or substitute fresh fruit or a salad.

Fast Food/Breakfasts

Ask for bagels with jelly on the side instead of cream cheese or buttery spreads. Avoid high-fat sausage, biscuits or croissants. Order specialty coffees with skim milk.

Pancake/Waffle House

Request “light stack” pancakes, and ask for butter on the side or not at all. Fill omelets with vegetables. Choose smaller omelets or split with someone else. Ask if “light” syrup is available.

Mexican

Leave the tortilla chips off the table. Order a la carte or split an order. Choose soft, nonfried tortillas for burritos or enchiladas. Have sour cream and guacamole on the side. Eat the taco salad without the taco shell. Bean dishes add dietary fiber.

Activity: What is your menu choice?

Order the lower calorie choice from these menu items. (Answers below.)

- Which sandwich has fewer than 500 calories?
 - Tuna wrap
 - Tomato and fresh mozzarella
 - Turkey
- Which breakfast has about half the calories of the others?
 - Belgian waffle and fruit topping
 - Two eggs and one slice buttered toast
 - Three slices French toast and syrup
 - Eggs Benedict
- Which Italian dish has less than 800 calories?
 - Fettuccine Alfredo
 - Spaghetti with meatballs
 - Eggplant parmigiana
 - Cheese ravioli
- Which side dish has at least twice the calories of the others?
 - Mashed potatoes with gravy
 - Rice pilaf
 - Coleslaw
 - Buttered baked potato

Answers

- C. Turkey: 350 calories. Tuna wrap has 600; tomato and fresh mozzarella: 700. Calories climb with cheese, mayo, guacamole or sauce. For low-calorie flavor, add mustard or veggies.
- B. Two eggs, scrambled, and a slice of buttered toast: 430 calories. Eggs Benedict has 700;

- the French toast with syrup *or* Belgian waffle with fruit topping each have 800. To avoid eating 400 milligrams of cholesterol in the eggs, choose egg whites or scrambled egg substitute.
- D. Cheese ravioli: 600 calories. Eggplant parmigiana has 800; spaghetti with meatballs, 1,200; and fettuccine Alfredo, 1,500. All have at least half a day's portion of saturated fat (the Alfredo has more than two days' worth). Instead, split an order of pasta with red sauce.
- D. A buttered baked potato typically has about 400 calories, double that of coleslaw, rice pilaf, or mashed potatoes with gravy. Higher calorie choices include French fries (600), loaded baked potato (600) and onion rings (900). Steamed vegetables offer fewer calories.

(From *Dining On A Dime* newsletter, K-State Research and Extension FNP, January/February 2007, and *Calorie Overkill*, J Hurley and L Lieban, Oct. 2006 Nutrition Action Newsletter)

Summary

Follow the strategies of this lesson and the guidelines of *MyPyramid*:

- ▶ Make half your grains whole.
- ▶ Vary your veggies.
- ▶ Focus on fruit.
- ▶ Get your calcium-rich foods.
- ▶ Go lean with protein.
- ▶ Find your balance between food and physical activity.

Careful choices and planning can promote health while dining out. Ask for health-conscious choices and preparation methods. Share food or request a carry-out box. Supplement meals with healthful snacks.

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Resources

University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service; Tufts University Health and Nutrition Newsletter; Weight Control Information Network, NIDDK, National Institutes of Health; *Timely Topics* and *You Asked It*, Department of Human Nutrition, Kansas State University.

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