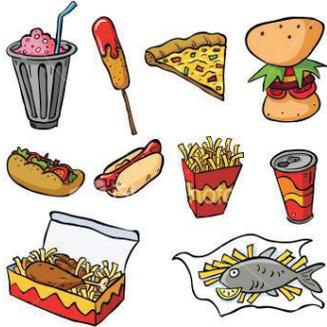


Manage Your Health: One Step at a Time

Tips for Making Healthier Fast Food Choices



Fast food is cheap, convenient, filling, and to many of us it tastes good. If you are eating out, a fast food restaurant is often the cheapest option, but unfortunately not a healthy one. Eating just one fast food meal can pack enough calories, sodium and fat for an entire day or more. Eating fast food on a regular basis can lead to a host of different health problems, both physical and psychological.

Still, in a bad economy the quick-and-cheap temptation can often be hard to resist. As an informed customer, though, you can make healthier choices and still enjoy the price and convenience of fast food restaurants.

When is it healthy to eat fast food?

The short answer is: rarely. Typically, fast food is low in nutrition and high in trans fat, saturated fat, sodium, and calories. Some examples:

- One sack of hash bites or potato snackers from White Castle, for example, contains 10 grams of very unhealthy trans fat. The American Heart Association recommends we consume less than 2 grams of trans fat per day. So in one side order, you've just eaten more than five days' worth of heart-busting trans fat!
- A single meal of a Double Whopper with cheese, a medium order of fries, and an apple pie from Burger King contains more saturated fat than the American Heart Association recommends we consume in **two** days.



Moderation becomes the key. It's OK to indulge a craving for French fries every now and then, but to stay healthy you can't make it a regular habit. Finding a healthy, well-balanced meal in most fast food restaurants can be a challenge, but there are always choices you can make that are healthier than others.

Learning to make healthier choices at fast food restaurants

Making healthier choices at fast food restaurants is easier if you prepare ahead by checking guides that show you the nutritional content of meal choices at your favorite restaurants. Free downloadable guides help you evaluate your options. If you have a special dietary concern, such

as diabetes, heart health or weight loss, the websites of national non-profits provide useful advice. You can also choose to patronize restaurants that focus on natural, high quality food.

If you don't prepare ahead of time, common sense guidelines help to make your meal healthier. For example, a seemingly healthy salad can be a diet minefield when smothered in high-fat dressing and fried toppings, so choose a salad with fresh veggies, grilled toppings and a lighter dressing. Portion control is also important, as many fast food restaurants serve enough food for several meals in the guise of a single serving.

Tips for making healthy choices at fast food restaurants

- **Make careful menu selections – pay attention to the descriptions on the menu.** Dishes labeled deep-fried, pan-fried, baked, batter-dipped, breaded, creamy, crispy, scalloped, Alfredo, au gratin or in cream sauce are usually high in calories, unhealthy fats or sodium. Order items with more vegetables and choose leaner meats.
- **Drink water with your meal.** Soda is a huge source of hidden calories. One 32-oz Big Gulp with regular cola packs about 425 calories, so one Big Gulp can quickly gulp up a big portion of your daily calorie intake. Try adding a little lemon to your water or ordering unsweetened iced tea.
- **“Undress” your food.** When choosing items, be aware of calorie- and fat-packed salad dressings, spreads, cheese, sour cream, etc. For example, ask for a grilled chicken sandwich without the mayonnaise. You can ask for a packet of ketchup or mustard and add it yourself, controlling how much you put on your sandwich.
- **Special order.** Many menu items would be healthy if it weren't for the way they were prepared. Ask for your vegetables and main dishes to be served without the sauces. Ask for olive oil and vinegar for your salads or order the dressing "on the side" and spoon only a small amount on at a time. If your food is fried or cooked in oil or butter, ask to have it broiled or steamed.
- **Eat mindfully.** Pay attention to what you eat and savor each bite. Chew your food more thoroughly and avoid eating on the run. Being mindful also means stopping before you are full. It takes time for our bodies to register that we have eaten. Mindful eating relaxes you, so you digest better, and makes you feel more satisfied .



Tips for what to AVOID at fast food restaurants

- **Supersized portions** - An average fast food meal can run to 1000 calories or more, so choose a smaller portion size, order a side salad instead of fries, and don't supersize anything. At a typical restaurant, a single serving provides enough for two meals. Take half home or divide the portion with a dining partner.
- **Salt.** Fast food restaurant food tends to be very high in sodium, a major contributor to high blood pressure. Don't add insult to injury by adding more salt.

- **Bacon.** It's always tempting to add bacon to sandwiches and salads for extra flavor, but bacon has very few nutrients and is high in fat and calories. Instead, try ordering extra pickles, onions, lettuce, tomatoes or mustard to add flavor without the fat.
- **Buffets – even seemingly healthy ones like salad bars.** You'll likely overeat to get your money's worth. If you do choose buffet dining, opt for fresh fruits, salads with olive oil & vinegar or low-fat dressings, broiled entrees and steamed vegetables. Resist the temptation to go for seconds, or wait at least 20 minutes after eating to make sure you're really still hungry before going back for more.

Watch your fast food sodium intake

High salt/sodium intake is a major contributor to cardiovascular disease. The American Heart Association recommends that adults stay under 1500 mg of sodium per day, and never take in more than 2,300 mg a day. A study by the New York City Health Department surveyed 6,580 meals bought at fast-food restaurant chains and found that:

- About 57% of the meals exceeded the 1,500-mg daily sodium level.
- Fried chicken outlets including KFC and Popeye's were the worst offenders, with 83% of meals exceeding 1500 mg of sodium and 55% of the meals surpassing 2,300 mg of sodium.
- At only one of the 11 chains included in the study, Au Bon Pain, did more than 7% of meals contain less than 600 mg, the FDA's "healthy" sodium level for meals. But even there, 46% of meals had 1,500 mg or more of sodium.
- Even those eating lower calorie meals were likely to exceed their daily sodium limit within a single meal.

Guides can help you make healthier meal choices

Many fast food chains post nutritional information on their websites. Unfortunately, these lists are often confusing and hard to use. Instead you can go to other websites that provide health and nutrition information, but in easier to follow formats. Some even publish comparison downloadable guides or inexpensive pocket guides. Learn how to make a healthier meal selection at your favorite restaurant. Check websites like this one for more information.

http://www.helpguide.org/life/fast_food_nutrition.htm