



Eating Together - Eating Well: Fast Food...Can It Be Healthy In A Pinch?

Fact Sheet FS1091



Cooperative Extension

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Busy schedules filled with work, school, and countless activities can leave families with little time for sit-down meals. Between work, school, and after-school commitments, eating out—or, rather, on the run—cannot be avoided. This ultimately affects food choices and family meal time.

Fast food is a quick way to squeeze a meal into a fast-paced lifestyle. But, healthy, nutritious options can be hard to find. Most fast foods are low in key nutrients like vitamins A and C, iron, calcium and fiber. They're also usually higher in fat, saturated fat, calories, and sodium. So...what's a busy family to do?

Fast Food Dining Strategy

Ideally, it is healthiest to avoid the fast-food venue. In the event that you need a "quick fix" for a family meal, use these strategies to make smart choices at the drive thru or counter:

Once In A While

The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests keeping trips to fast-food restaurants as treats, rather than routine meals. If you keep your family's usual diet well-balanced and low in fat, an occasional fast food trip won't hurt you. On the other hand, frequent consumption of high-fat foods – including cheeseburgers, chicken fingers and fries – is unhealthy for adults and children.

Variety

A balanced diet that includes a variety of foods will benefit your family's overall health, setting a standard for healthy eating habits. Review what your family eats over the course of the whole day, rather than each meal itself. If you know dinner will be a stop at a fast food venue, eat foods throughout the day that are lower in fat, calories and sodium to compensate for excesses you get in a fast food meal.

Did You Know?

- A salad made at a self service salad bar often has more calories than a burger, fries and a shake. (Calories from non-veggie toppings like croutons, bacon bits, eggs, cheese and high fat salad dressings can really add up.)
- A fried chicken or fish sandwich may be higher in fat than a hamburger.
- Many restaurants will omit sauces, dressings and seasonings at your request.
- Pasta dishes served with a tomato sauce usually have fewer calories than pasta served with a cream sauce.

Smart Choices

When you do eat fast food, it's important to make the best choices you can and pay close attention to the selections your family makes at fast food restaurants. The American Dietetic Association suggests that whenever your family dines out, you need to pay attention to food portion and remember that drinks contain calories, too. Try these tips next time your family decides to stop for fast food:

RUTGERS

New Jersey Agricultural
Experiment Station

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
88 Lipman Drive, New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8525
Phone: 732.932.5000

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Healthy Eating Tips

- Watch the portion sizes. For adults and older children, order the regular or child-size portion. Stay away from supersized or “combo” meals. For younger children, stick with the smallest child meal...don’t upgrade to the newer “big kid” meals. These larger portions may be cheaper, but they’re loaded with extra calories. Instead, pair a sandwich or entrée with a side salad. Or, if you’re taking fast food home, buy the sandwiches and pair them with your own sides...canned soups, yogurt, salads, fresh fruit, or vegetables with dip, or even pretzels.
- Think about the whole day’s food choices. If you eat a fast food lunch, make your breakfast and dinner healthier meals that are light in calories, fat, and sodium.
- Enhance the nutrition content of your sandwich by adding lettuce, tomato, or any other vegetables that are available.
- Choose grilled or broiled chicken on whole grain bread with low-fat condiments like mustard, ketchup, salsa, or low-fat mayonnaise if it’s available.
- Avoid high-fat salad dressings, regular mayonnaise, and special sauces on sandwiches. If you order a salad, ask for low-fat dressings and use half of the packet.
- Choose lean meats, like turkey breast and thin-sliced roast beef from the deli.
- Steer away from fried foods like fries and chicken fingers. If your family can’t resist them, order only a small serving or share an order.
- Choose a side-salad, baked potato, or fruit instead of fries or chips.
- Look for healthier “kid meal” options. If your kids can’t pass up the fries, order one “kids meal” with fries and another with fruit. Share the fruit and fries between two children or, between a parent and child.
- Save empty calories from soda and sweet tea. Look for healthier beverages such as water, low-fat milk, unsweetened tea, diet soft drinks, or 100% fruit juice. Watch out for hidden calories in sweet teas, which average about 120 calories for 16oz.



A Closer Look

With the variety of menu options available, it can be difficult to decide which choice is the healthiest. The tables below compare different foods available at many popular fast food restaurants. Use the Healthier Option suggestions to reduce the fat and calories in your next take out meal.

Arby's®

www.arbys.com/nutrition

HEALTHIER OPTION	INSTEAD OF	SAVINGS ON CALORIES/FAT
Junior Roast Beef Sandwich	Bacon Beef 'n Cheddar Sandwich	249 Calories/17 Fat g
Grilled Chicken Fillet Sandwich (no mayonnaise)	Crispy Chicken Fillet Sandwich	220 Calories/18 Fat g
Half Small Curly Fries	Large Curly Fries	462 Calories/27 Fat g

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Burger King®

www.bk.com/nutrition/PDFs/NutritionalBrochure.pdf

HEALTHIER OPTION	INSTEAD OF	SAVINGS ON CALORIES/FAT
Junior Whopper (no mayonnaise)	Whopper with cheese and mayonnaise	480 Calories/56 Fat g
Small onion rings	King French Fries with salt	460 Calories/26 Fat g
Tendergrill Chicken Sandwich (with mayonnaise)	BK Big Fish Sandwich	380 Calories/23 Fat g

McDonald's®

www.mcdonalds.com/usa/eat/health0.html

HEALTHIER OPTION	INSTEAD OF	SAVINGS ON CALORIES/FAT
Small Fries	Supersized Fries	270 Calories/14Fat g
Hamburger	Chicken nuggets (10 piece)	210 Calories/20 Fat g
Grilled Honey Mustard Chicken Snack Wrap	Crispy Chicken Snack Wrap	70 Calories/7 Fat g
Southwest Salad with Grilled Chicken and low fat dressing	Caesar Salad with Crispy Chicken and Caesar dressing	160 Calories/23 Fat g

Pizza Hut®

www.pizzahut.com/Nutrition.aspx

HEALTHIER OPTION	INSTEAD OF	SAVINGS ON CALORIES/FAT
12" Medium Thin & Crispy Cheese Pizza (1 slice)	14" Large Pan Cheese Pizza (1 slice)	190 Calories/11Fat g
Veggie Lover's® 6" Personal Pan Pizza	Meat Lover's® 6" Personal Pan Pizza	330 Calories/27 Fat g
12" Fit n' Delicious™ Pizza w/diced chicken, mushrooms, and Jalapeno (1 slice)	12" Medium Pan Supreme Pizza (1 slice)	150 Calories/12.5 Fat g

Pizza/Sub Shop

www.thedailyplate.com/nutrition/

HEALTHIER OPTION	INSTEAD OF	SAVINGS ON CALORIES/FAT
4" Turkey Breast Sub	8" Italian Sub	580 Calories/41 Fat g
8" Veggie Melt Sub	8" Original Cheesesteak	180 Calories/15.1 Fat g
8" Grilled Chicken Sub	10 piece Buffalo Wings	248 Calories/47 Fat g

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Taco Bell®

www.tacobell.com/

HEALTHIER OPTION	INSTEAD OF	SAVINGS ON CALORIES/FAT
Two Chicken soft tacos	Chicken Quesadilla	180 Calories/20 Fat g
Gordita Chicken Supreme	Fiesta Taco Salad	550 Calories/33 Fat g

Subway®

www.subway.com/applications/NutritionInfo/index.aspx

HEALTHIER OPTION	INSTEAD OF	SAVINGS ON CALORIES/FAT
6" Oven Roasted Chicken Breast Sandwich	6" Chicken & Bacon Ranch Sandwich	270 Calories/25 Fat g
Mini Ham Sandwich	Footlong Ham Sandwich	390 Calories/7 Fat g
Veggie Delight Salad with fat free dressing	Subway Club Salad with Ranch dressing (2 oz.)	375 Calories/38 Fat g
Baked Lays® Potato Chips	White Macadamia Nut Cookie	90 Calories/11 Fat g

Wendy's®

www.wendys.com/food/NutritionLanding.jsp

HEALTHIER OPTION	INSTEAD OF	SAVINGS ON CALORIES/FAT
Junior Frosty	Large Frosty	370 Calories/10 Fat g
Mandarin Chicken Salad with almonds (no noodles) and oriental dressing	Chicken BLT Salad with Honey Dijon dressing	360 Calories/30 Fat g
Small Chili	large Chili with sour cream and cheese	210 Calories/13 Fat g
Cheeseburger (kids)	Triple Cheeseburger	700 Calories/49 Fat g

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