



Eating Together - Eating Well: Fast Food...Can It Be Healthy in a Pinch?

Fact Sheet FS1091



Cooperative Extension

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With the changing consumer climate towards healthier options, the world's largest fast-food chains are racing to achieve the perfect balance of inexpensive, fast, and healthy foods. Although fast-food chains may not be replacing multi-bun burgers, fries, and chicken tenders for kale salad and brown rice, they have embraced the need to include healthier items on their menus, making it possible to make better choices when you are on the go. So when busy schedules filled with work, school, and countless activities leave your family with little time for sit-down meals, it's time to start scrutinizing fast-food menu offerings to find healthy options to make family meals nutritious, quick, and easy.

Fast Food Dining Strategy

When a "quick fix" is needed for a family meal, it is important to recognize the healthier options on the menu and use simple strategies to make your meal healthier. Healthier options are those foods that are "nutrient dense," meaning that they have a lot of nutrients but relatively few calories. They can be hard to find on a fast-food menu. Nutrient-dense foods contain vitamins, minerals, complex carbohydrates, lean protein, and healthy fats. The foods that are most nutrient-dense aren't often abundant on fast-food menus: fruits and vegetables; grains (especially whole grains); low-fat or fat-free dairy products; seafood; lean poultry and red meats; beans; eggs; unsalted nuts; and foods with limited amounts of solid fats, cholesterol, salt/sodium, and trans fats. Nutrient-dense foods provide the necessary nutrients to help children grow, and promote health and wellness for adults and children, alike.

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 with nutrient-dense foods, 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. Think about incorporating more nutrient-dense foods (whole grains, lean protein, and fresh fruits and vegetables) throughout the day, if convenience foods will be your dinner. Also, utilize the healthier options many fast-food restaurants now offer. Select healthier options over what you might normally order.

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 Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics suggests that whenever your family dines out, you need to pay attention to food portion and remember that drinks contain calories, too. Try the tips on the following page the 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: 848.932.5000

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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 larger “big kid” meals. These larger portions may be cheaper, but they’re loaded with extra calories.
 - If you’re taking fast food home, buy the sandwiches and pair them with your own sides: canned lower-sodium soups, yogurt, salads, fresh fruit, or vegetables with low fat-dip, or even pretzels.
- Enhance the nutrition content of your sandwich by adding lettuce, tomato, or as many other vegetables as are available.
- Choose grilled or broiled chicken on whole-grain bread with low-fat condiments like mustard, ketchup, salsa, reduced-fat salad dressings, or low-fat mayonnaise, if available.
- Avoid high-fat salad dressings, added cheese, 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, onion rings, hard taco shells, fish sticks, and chicken fingers.
 - If your family can’t resist them, order only a small serving or share an order.
 - Or, order one “kid’s meal” with fries, and another with fruit, and have everyone share.
- Choose a side-salad, baked potato, or fruit instead of French fries or chips.



- Avoid empty calories from soda and sweetened “sweet” tea.
 - Look for healthier beverages such as water, low-fat milk, un-sweetened tea, or diet soft drinks.
 - Look for 100% fruit juice, rather than punches and “-ades,” and keep portions small.

The Buzz About Specialty Drinks

In recent years, there has been an increased demand for specialty beverages, such as coffees, teas, smoothies, energy drinks, and other flavored beverages. While sometimes these items can contain nutritional or functional values, they also tend to be higher in sugar and calories. Luckily, as with food, more nutritious drinks are available as well.

Quick tips to choosing healthier drinks are:

- If ordering a specialty coffee or tea drink, order only one pump of syrup and skip the whipped cream.
- Try substituting drinks with low-fat or fat-free milk to save on calories and fat.
- Choose smoothies made with both fruits and vegetables and nonfat milk. Pass up ingredients like frozen yogurt, whipped cream, and candies/syrups; it will cut unneeded fat, sugar, and calories.
- Energy drinks and other flavored beverages are commonly sugar-sweetened and thus higher in calories. So, be sure to choose the lower-sugar option and the smaller size!

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. Review the Healthier Option suggestions to reduce the fat and calories in a fast-food meal. Notice how a few basic changes can save significant calories and fat—yielding a much healthier fast-food experience. Seek out nutrition information on restaurant web sites, menus, and nutrition information brochures to better understand what’s in the food you order. A product’s appearance on this list does not constitute a product endorsement or recommendation. Rather, the tables below are intended to illustrate examples of how to apply some of the healthy eating strategies listed in this fact sheet to reduce calories and fat in fast-food meals.

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Burger King <http://www.bk.com>

HEALTHIER OPTION	INSTEAD OF	SAVINGS ON CALORIES/FAT
TENDERGRILL® Chicken Sandwich without Mayo	DOUBLE WHOPPER® Sandwich with Cheese and Mayo	610 Calories, 55g Fat, and 620mg Sodium
Pancake and Sausage Platter	BK™ Ultimate Breakfast Platter	580 Calories, 35g Fat, and 1,450mg Sodium
WHOPPER® Sandwich without Mayo	Bacon and Cheese WHOPPER Sandwich with Mayo	280 Calories, 29g Fat, and 590mg Sodium

Chick-fil-A® <https://www.chick-fil-a.com>

HEALTHIER OPTION	INSTEAD OF	SAVINGS ON CALORIES/FAT
Egg White Grill	Chicken, Egg, and Cheese Bagel	180 Calories, 11g Fat, and 340mg Sodium
Grilled Nuggets	Chick-n-Strips™	210 Calories, 14g Fat, and 500mg Sodium
Honey Mustard Sauce	Chick-fil-A Sauce	95 Calories, 13g Fat, and 20mg Sodium

Dunkin' Donuts® <https://www.dunkindonuts.com>

HEALTHIER OPTION	INSTEAD OF	SAVINGS ON CALORIES/FAT
3 Powdered Munchkins®	1 Powdered Donut	140 Calories, 8g Fat, and 5g Sugar
Hazelnut Coffee Large	Hazelnut Swirl Hot Coffee with Cream Large	215 Calories, 12g Fat, and 48g Sugar
Egg White Veggie Wake-Up Wrap®	Bacon, Egg, & Cheese on a Plain Bagel	340 Calories, 7g Fat, and 730mg Sodium

McDonald's <https://www.mcdonalds.com>

HEALTHIER OPTION	INSTEAD OF	SAVINGS ON CALORIES/FAT
Hamburger without Cheese	Big Mac®	290 Calories, 20g Fat, and 470mg Sodium
Egg White Delight McMuffin®	Sausage McMuffin® with Egg	220 Calories, 22g Fat, and 70mg Sodium
Southwest Grilled Chicken Salad	Bacon Ranch Salad and Buttermilk Crispy Chicken	140 Calories, 16g Fat, and 190mg Sodium

Panera Bread <https://www.panerabread.com>

HEALTHIER OPTION	INSTEAD OF	SAVINGS ON CALORIES/FAT
Turkey Breast Sandwich on Whole Grain	Bacon Turkey Bravo® Sandwich on Tomato Basil	160 Calories, 14g Fat, and 730 mg Sodium
Broccoli Cheddar Soup, Bowl Size	New England Clam Chowder in Bread Bowl	680 Calories, 9g Fat, and 510mg Sodium
Pumpkin Muffin	Cinnamon Roll	440 Calories, 16g Fat, and 480mg Sodium

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Saladworks™ <https://www.saladworks.com>

HEALTHIER OPTION	INSTEAD OF	SAVINGS ON CALORIES/FAT
Bently™ Salad with Fat-Free Balsamic Vinaigrette	Bacon Turkey Bravo® Sandwich on Tomato Basil	190 Calories, 13g Fat, and 870mg Sodium
Organic Harvest Bisque-Large	New England Clam Chowder in Bread Bowl	150 Calories, 25g Fat, and 394mg Sodium
Nicoise Wrap	Buffalo Bleu Wrap	170 Calories, 2g Fat, and 1,280mg Sodium

Starbucks™ <https://www.starbucks.com>

HEALTHIER OPTION	INSTEAD OF	SAVINGS ON CALORIES/FAT
Cappuccino with Nonfat Milk (Grande Size)	Grande Pumpkin Spice Latte with Whipped Cream and 2% Milk (Grande Size)	300 Calories, 14g Fat, and 40g Sugar
Mocha Light Frappuccino® Blended Coffee with No Whip Cream and Nonfat Milk (Grande Size)	Molten Chocolate Frappuccino with Whole Milk and Whipped Cream (Grande Size)	280 Calories, 20g Fat, and 25g Sugar
Chocolate Croissant	Chocolate Marble Loaf Cake	160 Calories and 6g Fat

Subway® <http://www.subway.com>

HEALTHIER OPTION	INSTEAD OF	SAVINGS ON CALORIES/FAT
Oven Roasted Chick 6" Sub	Chicken and Bacon Ranch Melt 6" Sub	290 Calories, 25g Fat, and 680mg Sodium
Turkey Breast 6" Sub	Meatball Marinara 6" Sub	200 Calories, 15g Fat, and 240mg Sodium
Oven Roasted Chicken Salad	Tuna Salad	170 Calories, 22g Fat, and 90mg Sodium

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