How to Make Healthier Fast Food Choices

These days everyone is crunched for time, on a budget and searching for convenience. As a result, the intake of fast foods in America has increased. However, eating out can increase your calorie, salt, sugar and fat intake which can lead to weight gain, heart disease and diabetes.

Fast food restaurants offer huge portions, like double-sized fries and sodas, and triple-decker sandwiches. Recent studies found that when people are offered a larger entrée, not only will they eat more of that entrée, but they will also eat more of the other foods that come with the meal. In fact, you may eat 25% more when you choose a larger portion size. Since many fast foods are loaded with calories, fat, sugar, and salt, that extra 25% can add up to serious health problems. By being a savvy consumer, you can choose healthier options and portion sizes so that you can have your takeout and eat it too!

Feeling fried? Fried foods are loaded with saturated fats. Avoid dishes that are battered, crispy, breaded, and tempura-style. Look for grilled, baked, steamed, or lightly sautéed dishes. If you’re not sure how a dish is prepared, just ask! Ordering a McDonald’s Premium Grilled Chicken Sandwich (without mayo) instead of a 10 piece Chicken McNuggets will save you 19 grams of fat!

Soup or salad? Choose a soup or salad with your meal, but avoid creamy soups and full-fat dressings. Burger King’s side salad with fat-free ranch dressing has only 75 calories and zero grams of fat.

Share and share alike. Most entrées can easily serve two people. If you share with a friend you can create two meals for the price of one. An order of beef with broccoli packs in 900 calories, and that doesn’t include rice! Split it in half and add 1/2 cup of rice (1/4 of a typical takeout carton) for a total of 550 calories.

Portion Distortion. With restaurant portions being so big, it’s easy to load up on fat and calories. You can ask if they will make a half-order of a large dish or you can order off the kids menu. Burger King Chicken Tenders from a Kids Meal are half the size of a regular order at only 170 calories and 10 grams of fat versus 340 calories and 20 grams of fat.

Use a plate. You run the risk of overeating when you eat from the carton, so if you are eating take-out food at home, use a plate. Spoon a small portion into the plate and save the rest for another meal.

Eat your vegetables. Choose dishes that have a variety. Order a side of veggies (not fried) or a baked potato with your meal instead of French fries or chips. Ask if you can add extra to your favorite dish. Most places, even fast food restaurants, will accommodate your special requests, such as extra lettuce and tomato slices, or extra broccoli in your Chinese food.

Smart Snacking

Choosing healthy food is just as important at snack time as it is at mealtime. Incorporating healthy snacks can help maintain your energy level and regulate your appetite, preventing you from being starving by your next meal.

Though snacks can contribute to a healthy diet, they can also be a source of extra calories if not eaten in moderation. Make sure you select foods that contain important nutrients, not empty calories like candy, cakes, soda and chips. Include foods from all food groups such as fruits, vegetables, lean protein and whole grains. Here are some nutrient packed, low-calorie snack picks:

Big Bang for your Buck: 12 baby carrots, 1 cup of chopped cantaloupe/watermelon, 1 cup of gazpacho or 1 cup of nonfat fruit smoothie.

Combo: 1 thin wedge of honeydew melon w/ thin slice of lean ham, 5 whole grain crackers topped w/ thin sliced cracked pepper turkey or 5 Nabisco Original Wheat Thins topped w/natural peanut butter.

Crunchy: 2 cups light microwave popcorn, 1 dry-roasted, no salt, peanuts or 4 low-fat Honey Graham crackers.

Bottoms up: 1 cup sparkling water w/splash of juice, 1 cup herbal iced tea or 1 cup low-sodium 100% vegetable juice.

Mediterranean: 15 seedless grapes, 7 almonds, 16 cherry tomatoes or 1 1/2 cup chopped cucumber w/oil and lemon juice.

Sweet: 1 fig bar, 1/2 cup sorbet, 100% fruit juice pop or 10 frozen grapes.

Source: Klesius, Mike  AARP Bulletin October 2007

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Poached Apricots

Serves 8

2 cups cold water
1/2 cup sugar
8 fresh apricots, or 16 dried halves
2 (1-inch) strips lemon zest
1/2 tsp. vanilla
1 Tbsp. toasted sliced almonds

In a medium saucepan, combine the sugar with cold water. Bring to a boil and cook until the sugar dissolves.

While the syrup cooks, halve the fresh apricots and remove their pits.

Place the apricots in the boiling syrup. Add the lemon zest. Reduce the heat and simmer the fruit gently for 15 minutes. Remove the pot from the heat. Stir in the vanilla.

Cool the fruit in the syrup. Serve the apricots, with some of the syrup spooned over them, and garnished with the almonds.

Source: Dana Jacobi for the American Institute for Cancer Research

Fruit of the Quarter: Apricots

An apricot has a similar appearance to a very small peach. It is richly colored, fragrant and sweet. It is a rich source of beta carotene (vitamin A) and fiber. They are also low in calories and taste great poached with a little sugar. They can also be dried or made into jam.

Apricots are from China and were introduced to Europe by Alexander the Great. Franciscan friars brought them to California, which produce the largest amount of this crop for the United States.

California apricots are at their peak from May through August. Later in the fall apricots from Idaho appear. Winter fruit from outside the country are not worth buying because they will be hard and woody.

It is best to purchase apricots that are firm. They should be ripened at home by leaving them on the counter for 4 or 5 days. Firm apricots should be gold with no traces of green. A ripe apricot will be gold with a red tint. Avoid apricots that are wrinkled. Don’t be deterred from apricots that have small bruises or soft spots. Their extreme tenderness causes them to bruise easily, but these apricots are ripe and sweet. However, you should avoid apricots that are bruised all over. A ripe apricot may be refrigerated, but not longer than a day or two. Like peaches, they dry out quickly in the refrigerator.


To Schedule a Nutrition Counseling Appointment

Call 212-367-1259
or 212-367-1263