**Healthy Fast Food: Tips for Making Healthier Fast Food Choices**

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Fast food is cheap, convenient, filling, and to many of us it tastes good. Unfortunately, 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. Still, the quick-and-cheap temptation can often be hard to resist. As an informed customer, 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](http://www.helpguide.org/life/fast_food_nutrition.htm) 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](http://www.helpguide.org/life/fast_food_nutrition.htm), heart health or [weight loss](http://www.helpguide.org/life/fast_food_nutrition.htm), the websites of national non-profits provide useful advice. You can also choose to patronize [restaurants](http://www.helpguide.org/life/fast_food_nutrition.htm) 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](http://www.helpguide.org/life/fast_food_nutrition.htm) 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, basted, 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 of regular cola packs about 425 calories, which 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**](http://www.helpguide.org/life/fast_food_nutrition.htm) **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 your body to register that you 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.

Source: *MedPage Today*

**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 publish downloadable comparison guides, inexpensive pocket guides, or mobile apps for your smart phone. There are also many websites geared towards making healthy choices at restaurants depending on your specific dietary needs, whether your concern is diabetes, cancer, heart disease, or weight management.

See Resources and References section below for more information on finding guides to help you make healthier meal choices.

**Healthier fast food at burger chains**

Figuring out healthier options at your favorite fast food burger chain can be tricky. A typical meal at a burger joint consists of a "sandwich", some fries, and a drink, which can quickly come in at over 1700 calories for something like Burger King's Triple Whopper with a large fries and a 16 oz. soda. A better option would be a regular single patty burger, small fries, and water, which is about 500 calories. Alternatively you may enjoy a veggie burger smothered in grilled onion and mushrooms. Or if you want a large beef burger, then skip the fries and soda and have a side salad and water instead.

**The Big Burger Chains**

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| **Less Healthy choices**   1. Double-patty hamburger with cheese, mayo, special sauce, and bacon 2. Fried chicken sandwich 3. Fried fish sandwich 4. Salad with toppings such as bacon, cheese, and ranch dressing 5. Breakfast burrito with steak 6. French fries 7. Milkshake 8. Chicken “nuggets” or tenders 9. Adding cheese, extra mayo, and special sauces | **Healthier choices**   1. Regular, single-patty hamburger without mayo or cheese 2. Grilled chicken sandwich 3. Veggie burger 4. Garden salad with grilled chicken and low-fat dressing 5. Egg on a muffin 6. Baked potato or a side salad 7. Yogurt parfait 8. Grilled chicken strips 9. Limiting cheese, mayo, and special sauces |

**For a healthier fast food option at a burger restaurant try:**

* McDonald's Hamburger: 260 calories, 9g fat (3.5g saturated fat).
* Wendy's Jr. Hamburger:  280 calories, 9g fat (3.5g saturated fat).

**Healthier fast food at fried chicken chains**

Although certain chains have been advertising “no trans fats” in their food, the fact is that fried chicken can pack quite a fattening punch. According to the restaurant’s nutrition info, just a single Extra Crispy Chicken breast at KFC has a whopping 440 calories, 27 grams of fat, and 970 mg of sodium. A healthier choice is the drumstick, which has 160 calories, 10 grams of fat, and 370 mg of sodium. Alternatively, if you like the breast meat, take off the skin and it becomes a healthy choice at 140 calories, 2 grams of fat, and 520 mg of sodium.

Some tips for making smarter choices at fast food chicken restaurants:

**The Big Fried Chicken Chains**

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| **Less healthy choices**   1. Fried chicken, original or extra-crispy. 2. Teriyaki wings or popcorn chicken 3. Caesar salad 4. Chicken and biscuit “bowl” 5. Adding extra gravy and sauces | **Healthier choices**   1. Skinless chicken breast without breading 2. Honey BBQ chicken sandwich 3. Garden salad 4. Mashed potatoes 5. Limiting gravy and sauces |

**For a healthier fast food option at a fried chicken restaurant try:**

KFC Original Recipe Chicken Breast (with breading and skin removed) and a side of green beans: 190 calories, 4.5g fat (1.5g saturated fat).

**Healthy fast food at Mexican chains**

Fast food chains that specialize in tacos or burritos can be caloric minefields or they can be a good option for finding healthy fast food. Rice, beans, salsa, and a few slices of fresh avocado can make a very healthy meal. But adding cheese, sour cream, and tortilla chips can turn even a good meal into an unhealthy one. Also, it’s very important to remember portion control in these types of restaurants, as many offer enormous serving sizes. Simply eat half and take the rest home for another meal.

Several chains, like Taco Bell and Baja Fresh, have “healthy” menu options that feature less fat and fresher ingredients.

**The Big Taco Chains**

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| **Less healthy choices**   1. Crispy shell chicken taco 2. Refried beans 3. Steak chalupa 4. Crunch wraps or gordita-type burritos 5. Nachos with refried beans 6. Adding sour cream or cheese | **Healthier choices**   1. Grilled chicken soft taco 2. Black beans 3. Shrimp ensalada 4. Grilled “fresco” style steak burrito 5. Veggie and bean burrito 6. Limiting sour cream or cheese |

**For a healthier fast food option at a Mexican restaurant try:**

Taco Bell Taco Salad (without the shell, sour cream, or cheese): 330 calories, 13g fat (5g saturated fat)

**Healthy fast food at sub sandwich chains**

Many of us love the many different types of sandwiches available: hot, cold, wrapped, foot long—often served with a salad instead of fries. While their ads promote the health benefits of sandwich shops, studies have found that many people eat more calories per meal at a sub shop than at McDonald's. This may be because people feel so virtuous eating “healthy” as the ads suggest, they reward themselves with chips, sodas, or extra condiments that can turn a healthy meal into an unhealthy one.

You can make healthier choices at a deli or sub shop but you need to use some common sense.

**Subs, Sandwich and Deli Choices**

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| **Less healthy choices**   1. Foot-long sub 2. High-fat meat such as ham, tuna salad, bacon, meatballs, or steak 3. The “normal” amount of higher-fat (cheddar, American) cheese 4. Adding mayo and special sauces 5. Keeping the sub “as is” with all toppings 6. Choosing white bread or “wraps” which are often higher in fat than normal bread | **Healthier choices**   1. Six-inch sub 2. Lean meat (roast beef, chicken breast, lean ham) or veggies 3. One or two slices of lower-fat cheese (Swiss or mozzarella) 4. Adding low-fat dressing or mustard instead of mayo 5. Adding extra veggie toppings 6. Choosing whole-grain bread or taking the top slice off your sub and eating it open-faced |
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**For a healthier fast food option at a sub sandwich restaurant try:**

Subway 6" Roast Beef Sub (on whole wheat bread with veggies, no mayo):  290 calories, 5g fat (2g saturated fat)

**Healthier fast food at Asian chains**

Asian cultures tend to eat healthily, with an emphasis on veggies and with meat used as a “condiment” rather than the focus of the meal. Unfortunately, many Western versions of these ethnic foods tend to be much higher in fat and calories—so caution is needed. A great tip for all Asian restaurants—use the chopsticks! You’ll eat more slowly, since you can’t grasp as much food with them at one time as you can with your normal fork and knife.

**Asian Food Choices**

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| **Less healthy choices**   1. Fried egg rolls, spare ribs, tempura 2. Battered or deep-fried dishes (sweet and sour pork, General Tso’s chicken) 3. Deep-fried tofu 4. Coconut milk, sweet and sour sauce, regular soy sauce 5. Fried rice 6. Salads with fried or crispy noodles | **Healthier choices**   1. Egg drop, miso, wonton, or hot & sour soup 2. Stir-fried, steamed, roasted or broiled entrees (shrimp chow mein, chop suey) 3. Steamed or baked tofu 4. Sauces such as ponzu, rice-wine vinegar, wasabi, ginger, and low-sodium soy sauce 5. Steamed brown rice 6. Edamame, cucumber salad, stir-fried veggies |

**For a healthier fast food option at a Chinese restaurant try:**

Panda Express Tangy Shrimp with a side of mixed veggies: 260 calories, 7.5 g fat (1.5g saturated fat).

**Healthier fast food at Italian chains**

The anti-carbohydrate revolution has given Italian food a bad rap, but Italian is actually one of the easiest types of cuisine to make healthy. Stay away from fried, oily, or overly buttery food, as well as thick crust menu items, and you can keep your diet goals intact.

Watch out for the following terms, which are common sources of high fat and calories: Alfredo, carbonara, saltimbocca, Parmigiana, lasagna, manicotti, stuffed (all have heavy amounts of cream and cheese). Generally Italian places have lots of veggies in their kitchen so it’s easy to ask to have extra veggies added to your meal.

**Italian and Pizza Restaurant Choices**

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| **Less healthy choices**   1. Thick-crust or butter-crust pizza with extra cheese and meat toppings 2. Garlic bread 3. Antipasto with meat 4. Pasta with cream or butter-based sauce 5. Entrée with side of pasta 6. Fried (“frito”) dishes | **Healthier choices**   1. Thin-crust pizza with half the cheese and extra veggies 2. Plain rolls or breadsticks 3. Antipasto with vegetables 4. Pasta with tomato sauce and veggies 5. Entrée with side of veggies 6. Grilled (“griglia”) dishes |

**For a healthier fast food option at a pizza restaurant try:**

Pizza Hut Fit 'N Delicious Chicken & Veggie Pizza (2 slices):  208 calories, 9g fat (4g saturated fat)

**Chains with natural, high-quality fast food**

Whether you choose to eat fast food at a McDonald’s, a Subway, or a local deli, there are always menu choices that are healthier than others. However, some fast food restaurants offer a greater variety of healthy menu choices than others. In a recent survey of the 100 largest fast food chains in America, **Health magazine** compiled a list of the healthiest fast food restaurants. The top 5 were:

Panera Bread – provides a wide variety of healthy menu options, half-sized portions, and organic chicken. Plenty of healthy choices on the kids’ menu, too, but avoid the sticky buns on display at the counter.

Jason’s Deli – uses organic ingredients and encourages portion control by offering smaller meals at a discounted price. Beware of the sodium content of their sandwiches, though.

Au Bon Pain – serves healthy, low calories soups, salads, and sandwiches using whole grains and organic chicken. Nutritional information is posted at each restaurant, so it’s a good idea to check the sodium content before ordering.

Noodles and Company – cooks noodle bowls using healthy Soybean oil, fresh vegetables and organic meat and tofu. The desserts, however, are much less healthy.

Corner Bakery and Café – offers healthy breakfast choices, plus healthy salads, sandwiches, and soup. Check their website for nutritional information first, though, as it’s not available in the restaurants.