

Dining Out: How to Make Healthier Choices

Lisa Franzen-Castle, Extension Nutrition Specialist; Debra E. Schroeder, Extension Educator; and Melinda R. Vyhnalek, Extension Nutrition Education Program (NEP) Assistant

Use the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and MyPlate for healthy eating when dining out.

Time crunched Americans are eating out more than ever before. According to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Americans spend about 46 percent of their food budget on food prepared away from home and eat 32 percent of their calories from restaurant or takeout foods. In 2011 Nebraska's restaurants are projected to register \$2.3 billion in sales. Eating out often can lead to extra calories because of supersized portions, added salt and sugar, thick sauces, deep-fried preparation methods, and rich desserts. Check out the following tips to make your next dining out experience a healthier one.

Use MyPlate as Your Guide

The basic messages from MyPlate are to enjoy your food, balance your calories, and

- eat less and avoid oversized portions,
- make half your plate fruits and vegetables,
- make at least half your grains whole,
- switch to fat-free or low-fat (1%) milk,
- reduce sodium intake, and
- drink more water instead of sugary drinks.

Log on to <https://www.choosemyplate.gov/SuperTracker/> to get your personalized nutrition and physical activity plan, track your foods and activities to see how they stack up, and get tips and support to help you make healthier choices and plan ahead.

Watch Your Portion Sizes

Anyone eating on the run or at restaurants has probably noticed that food portions have gotten larger. Some portions are called “super size,” while others have simply grown in size and provide enough food for at least two people. With this growth have come increases in waistlines and body weight. For example, 20 years ago the typical cheeseburger was about 300 calories and now it is almost 600 calories. A plate of spaghetti was 500 calories and now, with increased serving sizes and plate size, it is a little over 1,000 calories. Take the portion distortion quiz at <http://hp2010.nhlbi.nih.net/portion/> to see how portions have changed over the last 20 years. If you have difficulty leaving food on your plate, split a portion with a fellow diner, ask the waiter if a smaller portion can be served, or ask to have the remaining food packed to take home.

Make Half Your Plate Fruits and Vegetables

Select from all vegetable sub-groups (dark green, red and orange, beans and peas, starchy vegetables, and all others) and fruits several times a week. Fruits and vegetables are essential ways to add fiber and important vitamins to your meals. Green vegetable salads and fruit cups are available on most menus and are a nice addition to meals. Many restaurants (including fast food) offer green salads with various combinations of meats, cheeses, and nuts as well as other vegetables and fruit entrées. Be cautious about the amount of dressing and extras that are added to the salad as these add fat, sugar, and salt far beyond the original fruits and vegetables.

Strategies for Healthy Eating Out

Plan before you eat.	Call ahead and order when you are not as hungry. Be the first in your group to order so you are not tempted to sway from your healthy choice. Watch out for the extras — beverages, appetizers, or bread and butter. Ask for a smaller portion — a child’s or senior’s meal — if available. When you are served, eat slowly. Put your fork down between each bite. Savor the taste of the food. Stop eating when you begin to feel full.
Curb a ravenous appetite.	“Saving up” for a special meal can result in overeating so avoid feeling starved when you go out to eat. Eat a light snack at home or munch on plain vegetables to curb your appetite. Drink water with lemon or lime while you wait and with your meal.
Share your food.	Share an entrée. Most servings are large enough for two people to enjoy. If not, add a soup or salad. Think about choosing an appetizer as an alternative to a large entrée. Ask for extra plates and share a dessert around the table.
Order a “to-go” box delivered with your meal.	Ask for a “to go” box when you order. When the meal comes, put half of it in the box before you start eating. This removes the temptation to eat more than you planned. Limit the time that the “to-go” box is at room temperature to two hours or less. Label the “to-go” box with the date and eat within one to two days.
Don’t drink dinner.	Restaurants often offer “meal deals” that include a drink. A large soft drink or sweetened tea can have as many calories as the meal. Order a diet drink or plain tea sweetened with a sugar substitute, if desired. Choose low-fat or skim milk. Water is the best and least expensive drink choice.
Know serving sizes.	To avoid portion distortion, comparisons can help you visualize appropriate serving sizes. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 ounce bread = CD case • 1 medium fruit, 1 cup cooked vegetables = baseball • 1 ounce cheese = two dice • 3 ounces chicken or meat = deck of cards • 2 tablespoons of peanut butter or dressing = golf ball • ½ cup cooked pasta or rice = light bulb
Health halo effect.	Don’t fall victim to the “health halo effect.” Researchers have shown that people who eat lunch at a healthy submarine shop tend to eat 111 calories more than those who eat at a fast food burger restaurant. The reason is, people who think they “sacrificed” by eating the healthier meal reward themselves with a special treat such as a cookie, chips, or a regular soda drink.

Make At Least Half Your Grains Whole

Choose 100% whole grain cereals, breads, crackers, rice, and pasta. Evaluate the serving size of pasta and rice to make sure they are not oversized for your dietary needs and activity level. In general, 1 slice of bread,

1 cup of ready-to-eat cereal, or ½ cup of cooked rice, cooked pasta, or cooked cereal can be considered as 1 ounce equivalent from the Grains Group. Whole grains are a rich source of fiber and micronutrients. Request whole grain breads, rolls, crackers, tortillas, and brown or wild rice whenever possible.

Switch to Skim or 1% Milk

Request skim or low-fat (1%) milk whenever possible. They have the same amount of calcium and other essential nutrients as whole milk, but less fat and fewer calories. Low-fat, flavored milk helps children make a nutritious beverage choice. Data shows that students choose flavored milk 70 percent of the time. One recent industry study showed that when schools removed flavored milk options, milk consumption dropped a dramatic 35 percent, on average. The findings suggest that the resulting drop in milk consumption equates to a substantial loss in nutrients that can't be replaced by another beverage. It requires three to four food items to match milk's nutrient combination and adds back more calories and fat than were being replaced.

Vary Your Protein Food Choices

Choose a variety of foods including seafood, beans and peas, nuts, lean meats, poultry, and eggs. Remember to keep meat and poultry portions small and lean. Select from protein options that have been grilled, broiled, poached, or roasted as these methods do not add extra fat. Avoid fried and deep-fried foods. A 3 ounce portion of meat, poultry, or fish is approximately the size of a deck of cards. Ounce equivalents of other protein sources include: ¼ cup cooked beans (such as black, kidney, pinto, or white beans), 1 egg, 1 tablespoon of peanut butter, or ½ ounce of nuts (examples: 12 almonds, 24 pistachios, 7 walnut halves) or seeds (pumpkin, sunflower, or squash seeds, hulled and roasted).

Cut Back on Foods High in Solid Fats, Added Sugars, and Salt

Choose foods and drinks with little or no added sugars. Look for menu descriptions that indicate the preparation method. As you read the menu, or make inquiries about how the food is prepared, pay attention to phrases that indicate lower fat preparation: steamed, in its own juice, garden fresh, broiled, grilled, roasted, and poached.

Phrases or words indicating foods to treat with caution:

- buttery, buttered, in butter sauce
- sautéed, fried, pan-fried, crisp, braised
- creamed, in cream sauce, in its own gravy, hollandaise
- au gratin, Parmesan, in cheese sauce, escaloped
- marinated in oil, basted
- casserole, prime, hash, pot pie

Other Ideas to Make Healthier Choices

- Order food made with light wine or tomato-based sauces; generally they have less fat than those with cheese or white sauces.
- Choose low-fat or light dressings or mayonnaise.
- Watch out for high-sodium foods, those that are pickled or smoked, in broth or au jus, or in cocktail, soy, or teriyaki sauce.
- Ask the server what type of fat is used. Try to replace saturated fats (solid fat) and trans fats with unsaturated oils. Request soft, trans fat-free margarine instead of butter.
- Substitute vegetables for French fries.
- Substitute a green salad and low-fat dressing for coleslaw, and whole-grain bread for white bread.
- Have extras “on the side” where you can control the amount that you eat. Butter, sour cream, mayonnaise, cheese, bacon, or other toppings enhance flavor but add fat and calories.
- Monitor your consumption of desserts and pastries. The salad bar is also a place for sugar-rich foods. Many “super” salad bars have puddings, several kinds of gelatin, fruit desserts, canned fruits in syrup, and ice cream sundaes.

Eating at Specialty Restaurants

- ***Steak or Seafood House.*** Choose grilled entrées at a steak or seafood house. Order the smallest entrée or share one and split the baked potato. Request butter and sour cream on the side, limit added sauces. Baked beans or steamed vegetables are good side dish choices.
- ***Oriental Food Restaurants.*** In Oriental food restaurants, go easy on the soy sauce and some of the soups. Inquire about the use of monosodium glutamate (MSG). Ask questions about preparation to learn if foods are deep-fried. Steamed rice is lower in fat than pork-fried rice.
- ***Mexican Restaurants.*** Bean and rice dishes of Mexican cookery enrich your meal with starch and fiber. Refried beans are often made with lard, a saturated fat. Ask how food is prepared. Leave the chips off the table. Choose soft, non-fried tortillas for burritos or enchiladas. Have sour cream and guacamole on the side. Eat the taco salad without the taco shell.

- **Pizzerias.** In pizza restaurants consider pizza with many different vegetables as toppings. They have more bulk and are filling. Double toppings of cheese provide extra fat and sodium.
- **Delis and Sandwich Shops.** Choose mustard, vinegar, and peppers to liven up your deli sandwich. Substitute baked chips for fries. Watch out for high sodium pickles, olives, and smoked or cured meats. Ask for whole grain breads.
- **Italian Restaurants.** Share a meal or take some home. Select a marinara or other tomato-based sauce rather than an Alfredo sauce with cream, butter, and cheese. Go light on bread with butter or olive oil. Choose seafood or chicken rather than meatballs or sausage.
- **Fast Food.** Order the regular, small, or junior size burger, not the double, in fast food restaurants. Choose grilled and broiled meats. Use ketchup, mustard, or salsa instead of barbeque sauce, mayonnaise, or “special” sauce. Split a small order of French fries or substitute with fresh fruit or salad.
- **Breakfast Foods.** When ordering a breakfast, ask for bagels with jelly on the side instead of cream cheese or buttery spreads. Avoid high-fat sausage, biscuits, or croissants. Order specialty coffees with skim milk and avoid the syrupy flavorings.
- **Buffets.** Look at the buffet first and plan your choices. Use a small plate and size portions accordingly. Fill half your plate with fresh fruits and vegetables. Sit away from the buffet area. Take dessert only after you have finished your meal, 20 minutes have lapsed, and you are still truly hungry.

Conclusion

When you have identified restaurants that provide the food choices that contribute to your long-term health, make them “regulars” on your eating routine. This works even for fast food restaurants. Food service establishments are usually happy to hear what patrons want to eat. Politely ask for items like skim milk, broiled meats, whole grain breads, or whatever fits into your personal dietary needs. If restaurants have made positive dietary changes, let them know that you appreciate

the changes. Encourage your family and friends to also order healthy foods so the restaurant can afford to keep them on the menu.

Acknowledgment

The authors would like to acknowledge the contributions of the authors of the original edition of this publication: Linda Boeckner and Karen Schedewtz.

Resources

- Healthy Choices when Eating Out by J. Stephens, Kansas State University Extension Fact Sheet, MF-2770. July 2007. Accessed at: <http://www.ksre.ksu.edu/library/fntr2/mf2770.pdf>.
- Nebraska Restaurant Industry at a Glance. Bureau of Labor Statistics and U.S. Census Bureau. National Restaurant Association. (2009). Accessed at: <http://www.restaurant.org/pdfs/research/state/nebraska.pdf>.
- Daily Food Plan. United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). June 2011. Accessed at: <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/myplate/index.aspx>.
- The Impact of Student Milk Consumption and Nutrient Intake from Eliminating Flavored Milk in Schools. School Nutrition Foundation (SNF). August 2010. Milk Processor Education Program (MilkPEP). Accessed at: http://www.milkdelivers.org/files/resources/final-version-for-md_082510_mdp.pdf.
- Eating out Without Pigging Out. Special Supplement to the Tufts University Health and Nutrition Letter. The Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy. February 2008. Accessed at: <http://www.tuftshealthletter.com/ShowArticle.aspx?RowID=465>.

This publication has been peer reviewed.

UNL Extension publications are available online at <http://extension.unl.edu/publications>.

Index: Foods and Nutrition Meal Planning

2001, 2006, Revised January 2012

Extension is a Division of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln cooperating with the Counties and the United States Department of Agriculture.

University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension educational programs abide with the nondiscrimination policies of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and the United States Department of Agriculture.