Fast Food & Take-Out Meals

Are you looking for meals on the run to fit your family’s busy lifestyle? Fast food restaurants, take-out and delivered food can provide quick, flavorful meals so that you can spend your time on other activities.

Sources of Fast Food
Food from fast food restaurants can be easy, fun and nutritious, because fast food franchises now offer more than just fried foods. Today’s healthy options include items such as chef salads, grilled chicken sandwiches, broiled fish, low-fat milk and frozen yogurt. Fast foods can supply the variety of nutrients your body needs, but you must balance foods that are higher in calories, fat and sodium (salt) with other menu items that are lower.

Some sources of fast food meals and snacks are:
- fast food restaurants.
- bakery-deli departments in supermarkets.
- submarine sandwich spots.
- convenience stores.
- sushi bars.
- wrap restaurants.
- noodle shops.
- bookstores.
- drugstores.
- institutions (e.g. schools, hospitals and businesses).
- sports and cultural events.
- recreational centers.
- vending machines.
- hotels.
- airlines.
- dining cars on trains.
- cruise ships.

Choosing Fast Food & Take-Out Meals
You can make wise food selections from any menu if you think about the nutritional value of your food, make healthy menu choices and watch portion sizes. Think through the menu before you get there so you won’t be swayed off course and make a last-minute decision that you will regret.

Keep these pointers in mind if you are a regular at the fast food counter, the supermarket deli, or any other source of take-out foods.

Balance Fast Food Meals With Other Food Choices During the Day: As you order, think about the foods you have eaten, or will eat, during the day. Make sure they fit into an eating plan that is varied, moderate and balanced for your good health. Foods eaten in a well-balanced diet contain varying amounts of many nutrients: proteins, vitamins, minerals, fats and carbohydrates. No one food contains all the nutrients, but most foods contain several of them. By eating a greater variety of foods, you are more likely to have a well-balanced diet that contains the right amounts of the nutrients you need.

Make Healthy Menu Choices: Choose fruits, salads, low-fat milk, 100% fruit or vegetable juice, baked potatoes with a variety of toppings, and sandwiches containing a lean meat, such as turkey, grilled chicken or roast beef. Use whole grain bread, rolls, or pita pockets for more fiber. Skip the mayonnaise-based meat salad sandwiches, such as tuna salad, chicken salad or ham salad.

For a healthier pizza, choose a thin crust and nutritious meat toppings (e.g. pieces of grilled or baked chicken, Canadian bacon and lean ham). Load up on vegetable and fruit toppings (e.g. red
and green bell peppers, onions, mushrooms, broccoli florets, spinach, tomato slices, artichoke hearts and pineapple chunks). Skip the high-fat toppings (e.g. bacon, pepperoni, sausage, olives, anchovies and extra cheese). Limit yourself to no more than two or three slices.

Here are other examples of healthy food choices.

- small hamburger on whole-wheat bun with mustard, ketchup, pickle, onion, lettuce and tomato, no mayonnaise
- grilled veggie burger on whole-wheat bun, no mayonnaise
- grilled (not fried) chicken sandwich on whole-wheat bread, no mayonnaise
- submarine or deli sandwich on whole-wheat bread with mustard and lots of vegetables, but no cheese and dressings
- roast beef sandwich on whole-wheat bread with barbecue sauce
- chicken or steak soft tacos; no sour cream or guacamole
- bean or veggie burrito
- single slice of veggie or cheese pizza
- side salad with low-fat dressing
- broth-based soups
- baked potato topped with vegetables and/or fat-free sour cream; no cheese, bacon, butter or margarine
- baked beans, corn on the cob, mashed potatoes without gravy
- frozen low-fat yogurt or low-fat ice cream

**Make Healthy Menu Choices for Children:**
Beware of the children’s menu, which may contain only fried and other high-calorie, high-fat foods. Children like simple food, so select two or three foods from the regular menu and let them pick their favorite. Ask for a child-size portion, or take half of the order home for later.

**Watch Portion Sizes:** The size of food portions at fast food restaurants has increased over the last 20 years. When ordering, think smaller. Select regular-size burgers, burritos and tacos. Order a regular or child-sized hamburger, and skip the “big,” “deluxe,” “super-size,” “value meal,” and double or triple-decker burgers with two or three beef patties. Instead of a foot-long sandwich, choose the smallest sandwich size or order half a sandwich, if available.

Select the smallest size beverage, or even a kid size cup, since most fast food places offer free refills.

Bigger portions mean more calories, total fat, saturated fat and sodium (salt). Don’t be tempted to upgrade or super size your fries, onion rings, milkshake or other menu options, because you will be super sizing your waistline and your food bill. A large order of fries and a large soft drink can add a hefty 500 calories to a meal. Also, it is not a “value meal” if you pay for more food than you want.

Big portion sizes can encourage eating until feeling stuffed, not just satisfied. As a result, some people, especially children, can lose the natural ability to follow hunger signals and appetite. This sets the stage for overeating and weight problems.

**Estimate a Serving Size With Your Hands & Everyday Items:** The 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans is a helpful guide to the correct serving size for each food group. Learn to estimate the proper serving size by measuring with your hand. The size of the palm of your hand is about one serving of protein or meat. The size of two fists is a serving of salad greens. The tip of the average thumb to the first joint equals one teaspoon of salad dressing, butter or peanut butter.

Everyday items like a deck of cards, a baseball, a computer mouse, domino, a music CD and a pair of dice are also good guides for serving sizes. For example, a three-ounce serving of cooked meat equals a deck of cards or a computer mouse. One pancake or waffle is the size of a music CD.

**Limit Fried Foods:** Fried foods are loaded with fat and should be chosen only as “sometimes” foods. A fried chicken or fried fish sandwich may contain more calories and fat than a burger! Broiled, baked and grilled meats are more healthful than fried meats and other deep-fried foods. Skip the French fries, or share an order to save calories and money. Substitute baked potato chips and pretzels for regular potato chips. Limit fried and high-fat side dishes.

Examples of lower-fat menu alternatives include: turkey or lean roast beef sandwich; grilled chicken sandwich with little or no mayonnaise; salad with low-fat dressing; low-fat milk or yogurt; chili; and...
baked potato topped with vegetables, lower-fat cheese or fat-free sour cream, but little or no butter.

Make Wise Beverage Choices: Choose water, sparkling water, mineral water, 100% vegetable or fruit juice, or drinks without added sugars (e.g. unsweetened iced tea, diet lemonade, or diet soda). Avoid regular soft drinks, which are high in calories but contain no nutrients.

Order low-fat or fat-free milk and milk products, which provide the same amount of calcium but less calories and fat than whole milk. Skip milkshakes and other drinks made from ice cream. A large shake may contain over 800 calories and all of your saturated fat allotment for the entire day!

Go Easy on Condiments & Dressings on Sandwiches & Salads: Add flavor without the fat by topping sandwiches with these items: tomato; lettuce; onions; cucumber; red and green peppers; carrot shreds or sprouts. Choose a low-fat cheese, such as sliced mozzarella.

Ask if low-fat or fat-free condiments and spreads are available. Use mustard, ketchup, or reduced-fat mayonnaise on your sandwich, and omit the regular mayonnaise and other dressing.

One packet of regular mayonnaise adds about 60 calories and 5 grams of fat. The same size packet of tartar sauce has about 70 calories and 8 grams of fat. A 1½ ounce packet of French dressing contains about 185 calories and 17 grams of fat.

Try to avoid other high-calorie condiments such as sour cream. Order tacos and burritos with salsa, but skip the cheese.

Go for a Healthier Side Dish: A side salad with low-fat dressing or a baked potato is a better choice than French fries. Other healthy options include a fruit bowl, a piece of fruit and yogurt, apple or orange slices, corn on the cob, steamed rice or baked potato chips. Skip dessert or eat it at home, because dessert is one of the most marked-up items on the menu.

Choose a Large Entrée Salad: Make a meal of a large green salad topped with garden vegetables and/or a grilled or roasted lean meat (e.g. grilled chicken, shrimp, lean roast beef, ham or turkey).

Ask for a fat-free or low-fat dressing served on the side. Skip the high-calorie extras such as a deep-fried shell, breaded and fried chicken or fish fillets, cheese, bacon bits, croutons and fried chips.

Fast Food for Breakfast
Do you buy breakfast on the way to work or go out for Saturday breakfast with your family? Then go easy on breakfast sandwiches. Choose healthful items like fresh fruit and yogurt, 100% fruit or vegetable juice, an egg-white omelet, hot or dry whole-grain cereal, toast or waffles. Spread jelly, jam or low-fat cottage cheese on dry toast, a whole-wheat bagel or an English muffin. Skip the butter or margarine to reduce fat.

Enjoy your whole-grain cereal with low-fat or fat-free milk. Choose whole-grain waffles with fresh fruit instead of pancakes. If you order pancakes, limit the portion size and skip the butter.

Avoid high-fat granolas, high-saturated fat foods (e.g. sausage and bacon), and baked goods that are high in trans fats (e.g. croissants, biscuits, muffins, Danishes and donuts). Lean Canadian bacon or ham is a better choice than bacon or sausage.

Amounts of Fat in Typical Fast Food
Skip the traditional fast food meals, such as fried chicken, a biscuit, creamy slaw and mashed potatoes with gravy or a hamburger, fries, a fried turnover and a soft drink. These meals are high in calories, total fat, saturated fat, sodium (salt) and added sugars, yet they are low in fiber, vitamins A and C and calcium.

There are 10 teaspoons of fat in a fast food meal containing a cheeseburger, French fries, a vanilla shake and an apple pie. However, there are only 5 teaspoons of fat in a regular hamburger, side salad with low-fat dressing, 1% milk and a frozen yogurt soft-serve cone.

Here are some examples of how many teaspoons of fat are found in typical fast foods.

- small cheeseburger or beef taco: 3 teaspoons*
- chicken nuggets (6): 4 teaspoons*
- medium French fries: 4 teaspoons*
- 2 slices pepperoni pizza: 5 teaspoons*
- fried fish sandwich: 5 teaspoons*
- fried chicken sandwich: 5 teaspoons*
- quarter pound cheeseburger: 7 teaspoons*
- double cheeseburger with sauce: 7 teaspoons*
- large taco salad with fried shell: 8 teaspoons*

*Note: 1 teaspoon = 4 grams of fat. Fat content varies based on factors such as portion size or amount of dressing or cheese included.

Choose foods wisely to limit the amount of fat you get and to help keep your heart healthy. Do not add salt to prepared meals. Get most of your dietary fats from fish, nuts, vegetable oils, and other sources of polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fatty acids. Limit total fat intake between 20 and 35 percent of total calories, or about 30 grams per day.

**Sources of Nutrition Facts on Fast Food**
About 75% of restaurants provide printed nutrition information for their menu items. Some of the large chains have actually done a nutritional analysis on their menu items as prepared. Other companies use food composition tables developed by USDA or other sources to estimate the nutritive values of their products. If nutritional values are not available at the counter, ask for the company’s address and write to them directly or go to their web site.

Generally web sites that end in .gov or .edu provide accurate, unbiased nutrition information. Sometimes web sites that end in .org and .com do, also. The best sites offer multiple tools, such as meal planning charts, calculators (for calories, body mass index and carbohydrates), and detailed information on individual ingredients and products.

MyPyramid.gov is the United States Department of Agriculture’s web site on healthy eating and living. It features a menu planner that shows your nutritional needs according to age, sex and level of physical activity. This web site also has children’s games on making healthy choices.

The eXtension.org web site has “Fast Food Menu,” an interactive menu that sizes up fast food selections from McDonald’s, Burger King, Subway, Chick-Fil-A, Domino’s and Taco Bell. It is available at www.extension.org/pages/Interactive_Fast_Food_Menu.

The Fast Food Explorer, an online database of nutrition facts on 12 fast food restaurants, is available at www.fatcalories.com.

To search for other restaurants in your area that offer healthy choices and the nutrition information on their menu items, go to www.healthydiningfinder.com.

CalorieKing.com is a food database of nutritional information for over 65,000 American generic and brand name foods, including over 260 fast food chains. This database is widely recognized as the best available for weight control. It is affiliated with Boston’s Joslin Diabetes Center, the world’s largest diabetes research center.

**For More Information**
**HGIC 4204, Planning to Eat Out** provides more information on choosing healthful menu items to reduce fat, sugar, sodium (salt) and total calories. It also includes clues to menu reading, tips to avoid pigging out when eating out, and ways to spend less money on restaurant meals. For food safety tips, refer to **HGIC 3608, Deli & Other Take Out Foods**.

**Sources:**