

# Healthy Choices When Eating Out

FACT SHEET

**K-STATE**  
Research and Extension  
Family Consumer Sciences

## The Facts about Eating Out

Americans are eating out more than ever. Ninety percent of consumers say they enjoy going to restaurants. According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2015), Americans on average spend about 43 percent of their total food budget on food prepared away from home and eat more than a third of their calories from restaurants, takeout, or other non-home prepared foods. The highest income earners spend 49 percent of their food budget on food prepared away from home. Food is available almost any time and anywhere today, encouraging consumers to eat more food and to eat more frequently.

Millennials (those born between 1981 and 2003) have surpassed the Baby Boomer generation and are now the largest living generation. Millennials currently make up over one fourth of the nation's population and they like to eat out a lot. Food preference and consumption surveys indicate that millennials are spending more of their food dollars on foods away from home (FAFH). Millennials spend 44 percent of their food dollars (\$2,921 annually) on eating out compared to the baby boomers, who spend 40 percent of their food dollars eating out. The Millennials consume food in a restaurant or bar around 30 percent more often than any other generation.

More than 70 percent of Americans 20 years and older are overweight or obese, according to statistics available through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Obesity raises the risk of preventable, life-threatening illnesses — including heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and certain types of cancer — and is responsible for billions of dollars in annual health-care costs. Weight and obesity problems are in part due to the increasing frequency of foods consumed away from home. In general, consuming foods away from home (FAFH) tends to increase total calories, total fat, saturated fat, sodium, and sugar in a person's diet.



# 70%

of adults say the availability of healthy menu options would make them choose one restaurant over another.

# 46%

of smartphone users order restaurant takeout or delivery at least once a month.

## How Much is Enough?

A "portion" is how much food you choose to eat, whether in a restaurant, from a package, or in your own kitchen. A "serving" is a standard amount set by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration or sometimes in cookbooks or diet plans. Restaurant portion sizes may equal two or three times the standard serving size recommended by the MyPlate plan.

The popularity of fast-casual dining restaurants, prepared ready-to-eat food available at supermarkets and convenience stores, and the use of technology apps for easy home food delivery has led to Americans spending more on foods prepared away from home than ever before.

Like previous generations, millennials indicate taste and price as main factors that impact food purchases. Also, they are asking for healthier and fresher foods. They want to know where their food comes from.

## Strategies

The following strategies are aimed at helping you make healthier choices when eating away from home.

- 1. Don't drink dinner.** "Meal deals" frequently include a large sugary drink. Specialty coffee drinks are also high in saturated fat and added sugar. Energy and sports drinks add unnecessary sugar and caffeine and should be avoided as a beverage choice with meals. Consider choosing water, unsweetened tea, and other drinks without added sugars to complement your meal. Other healthy choices include low-fat or skim milk. Remember, water is the best and least expensive drink choice (provided you are not purchasing bottled water).
- 2. Share a meal.** Consider sharing a dish with a friend. Most servings are large enough for two to enjoy. If not, add a non-cream based soup or salad. If adding a salad, request a fat-free or light dressing and have it served on the side. Think about choosing an appetizer as an alternative to a large entrée and ask for extra plates to share a dessert around the table.
- 3. Save "half" for later.** Ask for a "to-go" box when your food arrives and pack up half of your entrée to enjoy later. Take leftovers home and refrigerate within 2 hours. Leftovers in the refrigerator are safe to eat for about 3 to 4 days.
- 4. Customize your meal.** Ordering a salad and a side dish or appetizer-sized portion is a great strategy to add more vegetables to your meal. Usually those items are served on smaller plates and in smaller amounts. Starting your meal with a salad can help you feel satisfied sooner. Make sure you ask for fat-free or light dressing on the side. Stir-fry, kabobs, or vegetarian menu items usually have more vegetables. Select fruit as a side dish or a simple dessert. Request whole grains like brown rice, whole-grain bread, and pasta when ordering entrees and sandwiches.
- 5. Pack your snack.** If you often eat away from home, pack fruit, sliced vegetables, low-fat string cheese, or unsalted nuts to enjoy. There is no need to stop for other food when these snacks are ready to eat. Make sure you are packing snacks into single-serving containers to avoid undoing your good idea.

- 6. Understand serving sizes.** The MyPlate food guidance system recommends amounts of food to eat each day, including recommended serving sizes. The following comparisons can help visualize appropriate serving sizes.

Serving Sizes	
1 slice of bread = DVD case	3 ounces meat, fish, or poultry = Deck of cards
1 small fruit = Tennis ball	2 tablespoons peanut butter = Ping-pong ball
1½ ounces cheese = 9-volt battery	½ cup cooked pasta = ½ Baseball

*(Source: Kids and Portion Control—Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, March 15, 2017)*

## Choices When Eating Out

Part of the fun of eating out is to experience culture through foods. Whether you are tasting a new food or enjoying an old favorite, consider these tips to keep your dining experience both healthy and enjoyable. When eating out look for "Healthy Choice Options" on restaurant menus.

**Steak and Seafood** – Choose grilled entrees, not fried. Order the smallest entrée or share with a friend. Request dressings, sauces, and butter on the side. Baked or steamed vegetables are good side dish choices.

**Pizza** – Start with a green salad. Stick with thin-crust pizza; avoid cheese-stuffed crust. Choose low-fat toppings such as pineapple, spinach, tomatoes, broccoli, mushrooms, onions, and peppers. Ask for the pizza to be made with ½ of the regular amount of cheese.

**Italian/Pasta** – 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. Request whole-grain pasta if available.

**Chinese** – Look for dishes with vegetables. Request plain rice instead of fried. Replace egg rolls with steamed dumplings or spring rolls. Select chicken and seafood dishes rather than pork or duck. Won ton and hot-and-sour soups are lower in fat than others. Limit sweet-and-sour sauces, dishes made with nuts, and deep fried choices. Try sherbet, fruit, or a fortune cookie for dessert.

**Fast food/Sandwiches/Deli** – Order the regular or junior-size burger, not the double. Choose grilled or broiled meats. Use ketchup, mustard, or barbecue sauce instead of mayonnaise or special sauce. Condiments often are high in sodium so use sparingly. Split a small order of french fries or opt for baked chips, fresh fruit, or a salad. Ask for whole-grain bread if available.

**Fast food/Breakfast/Waffle House** – Ask for bagels with jelly on the side instead of cream cheese or buttery spreads.



Avoid high-fat sausage, biscuits, or croissants. Request “light stack” pancakes and ask if light syrup is available. Fill omelets with vegetables and split with someone.

**Mexican** – Leave the tortilla chips off the table. Order a la carte or split an order. Choose soft, non-fried tortillas for burritos or enchiladas. Skip the sour cream and ask for guacamole on the side. Eat the taco salad without the shell. Remember bean dishes are a lower fat option and add dietary fiber.

## Summary

Follow the strategies of this lesson and the guidelines of MyPlate:

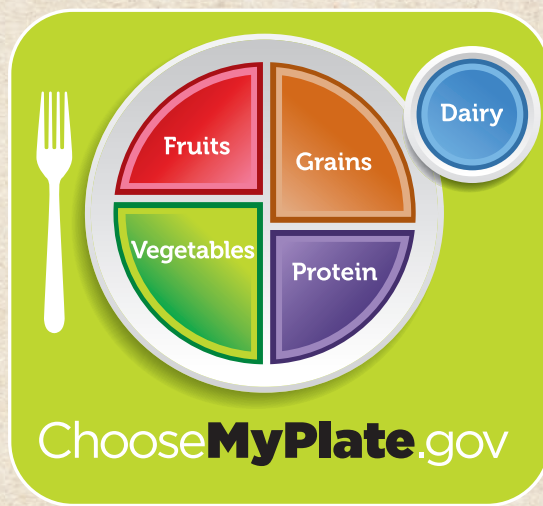
- All food and beverage choices matter – focus on variety, amount, and nutrition.
- Choose an eating style low in saturated fat, sodium, and added sugars.
- Make small changes to create a healthier eating style.
- Make half your plate fruits and vegetables.
- Make half your grains whole grains.
- Move to low-fat and fat-free dairy.
- Vary your protein routine.
- Eat and drink the right amount for you.

Careful food choices and planning can promote health while dining out. Ask for health-conscious choices and preparation methods. Share food or request a to-go box. Supplement meals with healthful snacks.

## Healthy Choice Activity

Which menu item provides the healthiest choice?

- 1) Which appetizer would be the healthiest choice?**
  - a) Fried cheese bites with dip
  - b) Black bean hummus
  - c) Stuffed mushrooms
  - d) Bacon and cheese potato nachos
- 2) Which entrée would be the healthiest choice?**
  - a) Baked tilapia with brown rice
  - b) Chicken fried steak with creamy mashed potatoes
  - c) Spaghetti with meatballs
  - d) Italian sausage pizza
- 3) Which beverage is the healthiest choice?**
  - a) 20 oz. soda
  - b) 16 oz. sports drink
  - c) Water
  - d) Iced tea
- 4) Which vegetable dish is the healthiest choice?**
  - a) Creamy coleslaw
  - b) Steamed broccoli, cauliflower, and carrots
  - c) Cheesy Au Gratin potatoes
  - d) Batter fried zucchini



Answers: 1 – b; 2 – a; 3 – c; 4 – b. Key words like baked and steamed reflect healthier cooking methods that do not add fat and calories to a menu item.

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