

Make Eating Out a Healthier Experience¹

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According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021), well over half (62.3%) of two-parent households have both parents employed. One easy dining option is to head out to a local restaurant for dinner. This is just one of many scenarios that have become a common occurrence in the busy lives of families today.

Dining out is an attractive option for many families. One study on eating dinner away from home found that parents' reasons for dining out varied, including low confidence in cooking, overestimating costs of home-prepared food, convenience, time restraints, having picky eaters, or wanting quality family time, among others (Robson et al., 2016). Americans now eat and drink about one-third of their calories from foods prepared outside the home, with these foods containing more calories, sodium, and saturated fat than home-cooked meals (FDA, 2022). However, there are still plenty of ways to make dining out part of a healthy lifestyle.

Tips for Before Leaving Home

Before you leave, plan ahead to compare dining options. Many restaurants have nutrition information on their websites so you can find options that are lower in calories, sodium, and saturated fat and identify healthier options you can incorporate when eating out. To avoid overeating on higher-calorie meals or meals later than your normal dining time, choose a snack that contains fiber and protein, such

as a small handful of nuts or fruit for a low-calorie option before leaving home. Do not skip meals as that may cause you to overeat. When available, review menus in advance so you can select a healthier option.

Before you dine out, search the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Data Central for nutritional information on menu items you are considering. This database is located at <https://fdc.nal.usda.gov/>.



Figure 1. A family eating at a table.
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Using the Menu as a Tool

The FDA requires calorie labeling on menus and menu boards for any establishment part of a chain of 20 or more locations. This lets you compare the calorie information to help you make informed and healthy decisions. Know how many calories you need per day and make sure you're not

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consuming excess calories. Drinks, appetizers, and dessert all add up. Not sure how many calories you need? Check out this online tool: <https://nal.usda.gov/fnic/dri-calculator>.

Additionally, item descriptions on the menu give insight on which choices are the healthier options.

Here are some tips to keep in mind:

- Foods labeled deep-fried, pan-fried, baked, batter-dipped, breaded, cheesy, creamy, crispy, smothered, scalloped, Alfredo, au gratin, or in a cream sauce are usually high in calories, unhealthy fats, and sodium.
- Look for foods that are grilled, broiled, steamed, roasted, poached, or baked and served without a cream-based sauce.
- Ask your server questions! Don't be afraid to ask how the food is made or what ingredients were used to prepare the item. If there is a particular food you would like to eat but it is prepared in a way that makes it less healthy, ask if it is possible to have it prepared differently. For example, if the item is breaded and fried, ask if they can grill the item instead.

Other questions to ask: Is this dish very oily or greasy? What type of oil is used to make this dish? Can salad dressing be served on the side? What are other ways to prepare this dish?

Making Small Changes for a Healthier Dining Experience

Making a single change may not seem like it would have a big effect, but as you add more changes they can have a positive impact on your family's health. The following are strategies you can use to make healthier choices when dining out.

- To avoid overeating, place half of your food in a to-go container as soon as your food is served and enjoy it the next day or freeze it for a later time. If you don't like to bring leftovers home, order a smaller portion, such as an appetizer-sized portion, which will often cost less.
- Know your portion sizes! Visit <https://myplate.gov> to learn more about portion sizes to build a healthier plate.
- When choosing beverages, choose water with lemon, or unsweetened tea without added sugar for healthier options.
- Share a meal. Not only will you reduce your intake of calories and fat, you will reduce the cost of your meal! If

the meal is not big enough to share, add a side salad with the dressing served on the side.

- Order a smaller serving. Try one size smaller than what you normally order. Instead of getting the large fries, order the medium fries. Some restaurants now serve smaller versions of desserts. This is a great option if you are craving something sweet but want to cut back on calories.
- Swap out sides for a healthier choice, such as a seasonal vegetable or tossed salad.
- Skip the buffet and order a healthier choice from the menu to help control portion sizes and nutritional value.
- Practice mindful eating. Chewing your food for at least 20 seconds and putting your utensils down between bites helps in preventing overeating.

Additional Resources

- You can contact your local UF/IFAS Extension Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) educator. UF/IFAS Extension offices are listed online at <https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/find-your-local-office>.
- For a referral to a registered dietitian (RD) in your area, you can visit <https://www.eatright.org/find-a-nutrition-expert>.
- MyPlate offers tips for a healthier plate when dining out: <https://www.myplate.gov/tip-sheet/dine-out-take-out>.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offers a dining out game plan and tips to make healthier choices: <https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/managing/eat-well/eating-out.html>.
- National Health, Lung and Blood Institute offers tips for making heart-healthy choices when dining out: <https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/educational/healthdisp/pdf/tipsheets/Tips-for-Eating-Out.pdf>.
- HelpGuide offers healthy tips when eating at fast food restaurants. It lists less healthy options at restaurants and the healthier available option: <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/healthy-eating/healthier-fast-food.htm>.
- KidsHealth offers strategies to encourage healthy eating habits in children: <https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/habits.html?ref=search>.

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Tips for Specific Types of Foods

The following guidelines, adapted from the American Heart Association (2010), can help you make healthier choices at restaurants featuring different types of food.



Figure 2. A family eating at a restaurant.
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Table 1. Making healthier choices at restaurants.

| Type of Food | Tips | Instead of... | Try... |
|------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Cajun food | Avoid fried seafood or meats. “Blackened” foods are usually dipped in butter or oil, covered in spices, and pan-fried. Ask for sauces and gravies of your favorite foods on the side. | Fried seafood | Boiled, grilled, or pan sautéed fish |
| | | Gumbo and sauces made with roux (cooked mixture of wheat flour and fat) | Creoles (which do not contain roux) and Creole jambalaya dishes |
| | | Dirty rice (contains chicken gizzards, livers, butter, etc.) | White or brown rice; rice in chicken stock for flavor |
| | | Red beans and rice with sausage | Red beans and rice without sausage |
| Chinese food | Choose entrées that contain lots of vegetables. Substitute chicken for duck as often as possible. Skip the crispy noodles. | Egg-drop soup | Wonton or hot-and-sour soup |
| | | Egg rolls or fried wontons | Steamed dumplings, grilled veggies |
| | | Fried entrées | Boiled, broiled, grilled, steamed, or lightly stir-fried entrées |
| | | Fried rice | Steamed brown or white rice |
| Family restaurants | Avoid dishes that contain a lot of cheese, sour cream, or mayonnaise. Ask about bread options. Try whole-wheat bread. Avoid or limit visits to buffets because the temptation to overeat is greater. | Cream soups | Broth-based soups with lots of vegetables |
| | | Fried chicken sandwich | Grilled chicken sandwich |
| | | French fries or potatoes and gravy | Baked sweet potato, a smaller size of French fries, steamed vegetables, potatoes without gravy |
| | | Hot fudge sundae or ice cream | Non-fat yogurt, sherbet, or fruit juice Share a dessert with all of the family |
| Italian food | Enjoy pasta as a main entrée and not an appetizer, or just order the appetizer size. Ask the waiter to hold the cheese and bacon, or limit the amount that is added. When ordering pizza, try toppings such as spinach, mushrooms, broccoli, and peppers. | Casserole-type dishes or cheese-filled pastas | Pasta primavera with sautéed vegetables, or pasta with white or red clam sauce |
| | | Pasta with butter or cream sauces | Risotto (a slow-cooked, broth-based rice dish), or pasta with marinara sauce (made of tomatoes, onions, and garlic) |
| | | Italian pastries such as cream cakes | Italian ice, granita, or sorbet |
| | | | Share a dessert with all of the family |
| Fast food restaurants | Pickles, onions, lettuce, tomato, mustard, and ketchup add flavor without the fat. Limit the amount of fried sandwiches consumed. | Jumbo cheeseburgers | Grilled chicken sandwich, or a smaller hamburger with lettuce, tomato, and onion |
| | | Fried chicken pieces | Grilled chicken or a salad |
| | | French fries | Steamed veggies, a smaller portion of fries |
| Mexican food | Ask your server not to bring fried tortilla chips to the table. Avoid getting refills. Ask for low-fat sour cream, or just use salsa for flavor. | Flour tortilla | Corn tortillas, or limit the amount of flour tortillas you consume |
| | | Refried beans | Beans |
| | | Quesadillas | Chicken fajitas |
| | | Flautas, chimichangas, burritos | Chicken or beef enchiladas with red sauce or salsa, a smaller burrito, fewer flautas |

Adapted from American Heart Association, 2010.