

Healthy eating at fast food places - are you kidding me?

Is it possible to eat healthfully at a fast food restaurant? The big name chains, such as McDonald's, Wendy's, Burger King, and Taco Bell want you to think so. All of these restaurants offer some type of "healthy" alternative on the menu to entice those who are watching their weight or simply wanting better options. But how healthy are these options? It depends on what you order, of course.

Aside from some options that can be quite healthy, such as salads, other options that may seem like wise choices may not be as great as they seem. Also avoid ordering anything in a large size, as this quickly adds extra calories and fat. Many foods also include extra sugars that quickly add calories.

McDonalds

Salads and salad dressings at McDonalds are quite low in calories and fat. A salad with dressing can go as high as 500 or more calories, but this is much lower than other choices. Salads do not necessarily mean that the nutritional value is high, however. Many salads are made with iceberg lettuce, which is primarily water. However, if you're trying to watch your weight, and find yourself with no other options, a salad can be a good choice. It won't likely make you feel full, so snacking ahead of time may be a good option to avoid other temptations while there.

Other options that seem like healthy alternatives can be deceiving. Whether a food is fried or grilled will also have a huge effect. But simply choosing between beef and chicken, for example, may not be enough. The Premium Crispy Chicken Club Sandwich has 680 calories compared to the Big Mac's 560. The key is to look for grilled alternatives and avoid the tempting sides, such as fries or desserts.

Wendy's

If you're opting for a salad, choose wisely. Just because a menu item includes the word "salad" does not mean it's healthy. Wendy's Taco Salad, for example, comes with almost 400 calories if you only look at the basic salad ingredients; add in the extras that come with it, and the total is nearly 700 calories. This is about a third of a day's totals on a 2,000 calorie per day diet. Even a seemingly healthy broccoli and cheese baked potato comes with 340 calories.

If you're hungry, it can be very difficult to avoid the temptations of the fast food restaurant. This can be dangerous from the sense of added fat and calories. Should you give into temptation at Wendy's and order a "biggie" fries, you'll be taking in an extra 590 calories and 28 grams of fat.

What about alternatives such as the low fat strawberry flavored yogurt? The yogurt itself is 200 calories, and the granola topping that comes with it is an extra 110 calories. In comparison, an average cup of low fat yogurt from the grocery store will have around 100 calories.

Burger King

Burger King provides an array of eating options through its website for those who are watching carbs, fats, or calories. Many salads listed have from between 10 and 13 grams of fat, or 90 to 117 calories from fat. Salads fall in the 400 total calorie range. The dressings will add another 70 to 270 calories, for a total of up to almost 700 calories. Again, this is almost a third of a day's total caloric intake. The original Whopper sandwich with everything on it has about the same amount of calories. Depending on the salad and dressing chosen, the salad option can actually have more total fat than the Whopper. In other words, eating a "healthy" salad instead of a sandwich may not provide you with the benefits you're looking for.

Taco Bell

Taco Bell offers "Fresco Style" options that have fewer than ten grams of fat per serving. This translates into the cheeses and sauces being removed from the item. This style can reduce total fat and caloric intake. Many items on the Fresco Style menu are under 400 calories. The key to ordering through this method is to know which items are available Fresco Style and which are not. Most items offer this option, but many do not. Ask prior to ordering.

One final word of caution when it comes to fast food: even when the options are low fat and low calorie, many are still very high in sodium content and low in fiber content. The total nutritional value is an issue. Cooking methods, such as deep-frying or leaving foods under hot lamps for extended periods can dramatically reduce a food's nutritional value. So what's the bottom line? While the occasional visit to a fast food restaurant can be enjoyable and will not create too many negative side affects, the idea that 'healthy' alternatives at fast food chains are in fact 'healthy' is questionable.

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