

Healthy Tips on Eating Out and Grocery Shopping

How does eating food prepared outside of home affect my health and weight?

Research shows that every year Americans are eating more meals away from home. In fact, almost half (43%) of all meals in 2012 were prepared at sit-down restaurants, fast food places, or other locations away from home.¹ These outside meals tend to have more calories, more saturated fats and refined sugars. They also have fewer nutrients like calcium, iron, and fiber. In other words, this trend is causing Americans to be overweight and malnourished. (This means they are not getting the nutrients needed for health, growth, and the body to work properly).

Reasons Americans eat meals outside of the home include the following:

- Fewer Americans know how to cook food at home.
- Fast food restaurants and home delivery companies are convenient and inexpensive.
- Today's active families have less time at home to prepare food.
- Modern restaurants offer more varieties of foods.
- TV advertising for fast food and restaurants has increased.
- Food deserts are becoming more common. (See the next question below).

When you eat food prepared at a restaurant, you have less control over what you eat. Since the 1970s, meals have become supersized. Portions have become two to five times as large as they were twenty years ago.² Part of this rise in portion size is happening because people are demanding more bang for their buck. They feel bigger portions mean they're getting a better deal.³ Our plates are getting bigger while the healthfulness of our food is getting worse.⁴

What are food deserts?

We mentioned above that food deserts are increasing in the United States, and this is one reason why people eat out more often.

A food desert is an area in the United States where at least one third of the people lives at least one mile away from a supermarket.⁵ Low-income areas in cities may not have access to fresh fruits, vegetables, and other healthy foods at supermarkets. If you live in a food desert and don't have access to a supermarket, consider trying some of the ideas below.

How do I eat healthy outside of my home?

You might pack a brown bag lunch to take to work, include healthy snacks in a cooler in your car so you don't stop at a gas station for a donut, or make coffee at home. (So that you don't

drink coffee from chains that can be 400 or more calories). Check to see if your local clinic has a Healthy Teaching Kitchen or consider taking a cooking class online or in your community. (See the section “For more information” at the end of this handout for an online course through Great Courses and the Culinary Institute of America, or check in your community for a low-cost class.)

If you do go out to eat, consider doing the following:

- Eat a healthy salad at home before you leave for the restaurant. Or you can make a smoothie with 1 cup of greens, 1-2 fruits, yogurt, milk, chia seeds, and 15 grams of lean protein or whey). These ideas will help you feel less hungry when you sit down for your outside meal. If you don't have time for this, drink two tall glasses of water before you start eating.
- If you are going to a fast-food restaurant, check the menu online ahead of time. Many restaurants and chains now post menus online that list how many calories are in each dish. Looking at these numbers beforehand and planning out what you eat can save you from eating extra, hidden calories.
- Try to pick restaurants that offer at least one healthy eating option.
- As soon as you get your food, ask for a to-go box and immediately put half of your meal in the box to take home. If you are still hungry after eating half of the meal, wait at least 20 minutes before eating the second half in the box.
- Try to chew as many times as possible and put your utensils down between bites. This will allow your body time to feel full.
- Err on the side of ordering less rather than more. Try not to think about getting the best deal but rather choosing the healthiest option that still tastes good.
- Avoid eating at buffets.
- Order meals that have more fruits, vegetables, and fiber. Avoid foods that have more sugar and refined carbohydrates, saturated fats, and trans-fats. This means avoiding fried foods, unhealthy sides like French fries and potato chips, items heavy on bread and cheese, sugary drinks, and white pastas. You can also always ask to increase the vegetables in a dish.
- Realize that “low fat” options often exchange fat for carbohydrates, and this still causes you to gain weight. Be on the lookout for this at restaurants.
- Cut down on bread, tortilla chips, and other “extras” provided at the beginning of meals. These will add hundreds of extra calories to your meal. In fact, ask the waiter to skip the bread basket because you are likely to eat it if it is in front of you.
- Minimize alcohol and other beverages during meals. Drinking beverages other than water can lead to eating more calories overall and ordering more food than you would have otherwise ordered.
- Avoid dessert in the restaurant. If you do eat a dessert, share it with others and try to stop at two bites because we enjoy the first two bites the most.

What if I want to eat at home but I can't afford to spend a lot on groceries?

There are many ways you can stretch your dollar at supermarkets.

- Freeze fresh fruits and vegetables to keep them from going bad too quickly.

- Try to eat more fruits and vegetables and less meat since this can save you a lot of money in the long run.
- Plan your ingredients for meals based on what is on sale for the week.
- Buy canned foods to save money. Many fruits, vegetables, and legumes (beans) are just as tasty out of a can. Make sure these foods have fewer preservatives and less sodium overall.
- Take a few hours at the beginning of the week to plan meals for the rest of the week. Consider cooking in batches. Cook one to two times per week to prepare all of the meals you need for that week. Then freeze some of the meals and keep some in the refrigerator. Consider always keeping a salad ready in the refrigerator (without the dressing added so that it stays fresh longer).
- Repurpose leftovers. This means making a new meal out of leftover ingredients from a previous meal.
- If you can, shop at farmers' markets, where you will often find the best prices for fruits and vegetables.
- Alternatively, see if there is a local community supported agriculture (CSA) available in your area so that your fruits and vegetables are shipped directly to your home at a cheaper price.
- Cut out the junk food. This means avoiding the center of a supermarket and shopping on the outside where all of the healthier foods are located. It may seem like processed foods are the cheapest. Yet, they add up at the end of a grocery trip and cause weight gain without making you feel satisfied after eating them.
- Make a grocery list and stick to it. Make sure never to shop on an empty stomach.

What is the most important thing that I can do to eat healthy when my options are limited?

Try to remember that it's harder to lose weight than to gain weight. So you might suffer for many days in the future because of unhealthy choices you make today. Think about how much you would have to exercise to undo the bad choices you might make when eating out.

To help you understand this, there are many fast-food exercise calculators available online (See "For more information" below.) These tools can help you see just how hard it is to work off an unhealthy food choice. For example, a fast-food bacon cheeseburger, large French fries, and chocolate chip cookies can add up to 1600 calories. This would require 4 hours and 45 minutes of walking to work off these calories.

For you to consider:

- Think back over what you've read and note two actions you could commit to for the next three weeks. If you have someone available to support you, share this commitment with her or him.
- Do you eat meals prepared outside your home a lot? If yes, what idea/s do you want to try so you eat healthier when you eat out?
- Do you want to save money by eating at home? If so, which ideas will you try first?



The information in this handout is general. **Please work with your registered dietitian/nutritionist or health care team to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health and happiness.**

For more information:

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program	A variety of Integrative Whole Health handouts on your surroundings	https://www.fammed.wisc.edu/integrative/resources/modules/
VA Nutrition and Food Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy Teaching Kitchen classes and recipes • Healthy Teaching Kitchen Videos • Healthy Sustainable Eating Tips 	http://www.nutrition.va.gov/Healthy_Teaching_Kitchen.asp https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijtZOe0dvwA&list=PL3AQ_JVoBEywA0DxUr5WalEVr6iGcnjYf http://www.nutrition.va.gov/Sustainability.asp
Nutribody for your health	Fast food exercise equivalent calculator	http://nutribody.com/fast-food-exercise-calculator.asp
The Great Courses and Culinary Institute of America	24 online cooking lessons to start cooking	https://www.thegreatcourses.com/partners/cia-partner
Look for a cooking class in your community.		

This handout was adapted for the University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program from the original written for the Veteran Health Administration (VHA) by Sagar Shah MD, Academic Integrative Health Fellow, Integrative Health Program, University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine and Community Health. The handout was reviewed and edited by Veterans and VHA subject matter experts.

References

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5. Gallagher M. USDA defines food deserts. Accessed June 27, 2016, <http://americannutritionassociation.org/newsletter/usda-defines-food-deserts>