



Tips for Ordering Healthful Restaurant Foods

- Before leaving for a restaurant, check its website to see if nutrition information is offered for its menu items.
- Before placing your order, ask the person taking the order questions about

ingredients and preparation methods. Always find out what automatically comes with the meal, so that you may customize your order accordingly.

- Don't hesitate to make special requests, such as less cheese or oil, or dressing on the side.
- Request substitutions: a baked potato instead of fries, a side salad instead of macaroni salad, brown rice instead of white rice, corn tortillas instead of flour tortillas.
- Order creatively—for example, compose a meal by combining a soup, appetizer, and side dishes.
- Share an entrée with your dining companion and order an extra side dish or two to “fill out” your meal.

Seven Myths about Restaurant Dining and Nutrition

Even the most nutrition-savvy diner may hold assumptions about restaurant dining that can undermine good intentions. Here are a few common ones:

1. You can easily spot the more healthful choices on restaurant menus. Restaurant menu descriptions do not always provide enough information for diners to make educated choices. While a knowledgeable server can be helpful, diners looking for nutrition information should check the websites of individual restaurants.
2. People watching their weight or trying to eat healthfully should avoid fast food restaurants. Fast food establishments are often considered poor destinations for those watching what they eat. These days, however, people can find healthful selections, including salads, grilled chicken and fish, fruit, yogurt, and whole-grain items, at many fast food eateries. As consumers increasingly order and request more healthful choices at fast food and other kinds of restaurants, these establishments will increasingly offer them.
3. Restaurant dining is for special occasions, so why not splurge when eating out? It's true that decades ago restaurant dining was a special-occasion event, but for many of us today, restaurant dining is practically a daily activity. If you eat out on a regular basis, you probably don't want to view every restaurant meal as an opportunity to splurge.

4. A heart symbol or icon next to a menu item signals a low-calorie item. This is sometimes true, but not always. A restaurant may have placed a heart symbol beside certain menu items for any number of reasons—for example, use of heart-healthy olive oil or preservative-free ingredients, presence of omega-3 fatty acids, or vegetarian status. A good rule of thumb is not to make any assumptions.

5. Chicken and fish are always good choices. Chicken (specifically skinless, white-meat poultry) and fish are better choices than red meat, as they are lower in calories, total fat, and saturated fat. However, other factors come into play, including portion size, preparation method, and presence of sauces and other added ingredients such as oil or cheese.

6. Red-meat dishes are off limits for health-conscious people. It's true that the less red meat in the diet, the better. However, those who enjoy red meat can do so if they keep the following four guidelines in mind:

- Choose lean cuts (such as sirloin).
- Trim visible fat.
- Limit red-meat occasions to once or twice a week.
- Keep portion size in mind. Restaurants often serve red-meat portions of six to ten ounces per serving—and sometimes even larger portions.

As three to four ounces of protein per meal is the recommended portion size, the following strategies can help you negotiate your red meat allocation when restaurant dining:

- Share both a red-meat and a white-meat entrée with your dining companion.
- Share one red-meat entrée and order an extra side dish or two to round out your meal.
- Order a red-meat entrée and plan to take part of it home to enjoy the following day.
- “Bank” part of your protein allocation from other meals that day, allowing for a larger portion for your restaurant meal.
- Look for Asian dishes, which often combine protein with vegetables—a great way to limit the amount of red meat.

7. Vegetarian dishes are always healthful. Despite repeated encouragement about consuming plant foods, Americans are still falling short in the fruit and vegetable department. Those looking to add vegetables may be tempted to believe that vegetarian dishes are automatically good choices. However, some vegetarian menu items contain a lot of cheese, oil, or nuts and could therefore be very high in calories, fat, saturated fat, and sodium. Also, some vegetarian dishes do not include many or even any vegetables. Be mindful, even when opting for vegetarian menu items.

From Erica Bohm published in the Health Aging Dietetic Practice Group of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Newsletter Winter 2016