

Healthy Fast Food

Tips for Making Healthier Fast Food Choices



When you're hungry and on the run, fast food can really hit the spot. It's cheap, tasty, and, best of all, convenient. But it's also loaded with calories, sodium, and fat—often enough in one meal for an entire day.

Fast food menus are tricky when you're watching your weight or your health. Finding a healthy, well-balanced meal in most fast food restaurants is a challenge. But there are always healthier options hidden among the diet disasters. You just need to know where to look and how to order.

Is there such a thing as healthy fast food?

The truth is that it's extremely difficult to follow a healthy diet when you're eating regularly at fast food restaurants. Fast food is typically high in trans fat, saturated fat, sodium, and calories. And it also tends to be low in nutrients and almost totally lacking in fruits, vegetables, and fiber.

That doesn't mean you have to avoid fast food entirely. It's OK to indulge a craving every once in awhile, but to stay healthy you can't make it a regular habit. The key is moderation—both in how often you frequent fast food chains and what you order once you're there. There are always choices you can make that are healthier than others. The following tips and menu recommendations can help you stay on track. Just remember that even the healthiest fast food options often have other nutritional drawbacks such as high sodium. So try to keep fast food to the occasional treat.

Aim to keep your entire meal to 500 calories or less. The average adult eats 836 calories per fast food meal—and underestimates what they ate by 175 calories. So don't guess! Most chains post nutritional info both on their websites and at the franchise location. Take advantage of this information.

Opt for foods that are lower in fat and higher in protein and fiber. Look for items with more good stuff, like [fiber](#), whole grains, and [high-quality protein](#). Also aim for options that are relatively low in saturated fats. And steer clear of all items that contain trans fats.

Bring your own add-on items if you really want a health boost. Even when you order wisely, it can be pretty tough to get enough fiber and other important vitamins and nutrients from a fast food menu. If you plan ahead, you can bring healthy sides and toppings like dried fruit, nuts and seeds, carrot sticks, apple or pear slices, and cottage cheese or yogurt.

Watch your sodium intake

High sodium intake is a major contributor to cardiovascular disease. The American Heart Association recommends that adults stay under 1500 mg of sodium per day, and never take in more than 2,300 mg a day. Unfortunately, that's tough to do when eating fast food, even when you're eating lower calorie meals. Your best bet: plan ahead if possible and eat low sodium in the meals leading up to and following your fast food meal. However, you can minimize some of the damage by requesting that your burger or meat be cooked without added salt.

Guides can help you make healthier choices

Many fast food chains post nutritional information on their websites. Sometimes, these lists are confusing and hard to use, but they are the best source for accurate, up-to-date information on your menu options. There are also many other websites and apps that provide nutritional information, often in easier to use formats.

Making healthier fast food choices on the go

Making healthier fast food choices is easier if you plan ahead by checking the nutritional guides that most chains post on their websites. But if you don't have the chance to prepare, you can still make smarter choices by following a few common sense guidelines.

Healthier fast food ordering guidelines

Keep your eye on portion size. Many fast food meals deliver enough food for several meals in the guise of a single serving. Avoid supersized and value-sized items, and go for the smallest size when it comes to sandwiches, burgers, and sides. You can also find more reasonable portions on the children's menu.

Focus on grilled or roasted lean meats. Avoid fried and breaded items, such as crispy

chicken sandwiches and breaded fish fillets. Choose turkey, chicken breast, lean ham, or lean roast beef instead. Grilled skinless chicken is usually your best bet.

Pay attention to the descriptions on the menu. Dishes labeled deep-fried, pan-fried, baked, batter-dipped, breaded, creamy, crispy, scalloped, or au gratin are usually high in calories, unhealthy fats, and sodium. Same with items in Alfredo or cream sauce.

Don't be afraid to special order. Many menu items can be made healthier with a few tweaks and substitutions. For example, you can ask to hold the sauce or dressing or serve it on the side. Or you can request a wheat bun for your hamburger or whole-grain bread for your sandwich.

Don't assume that healthy-sounding dishes are always your best option. For example, many fast food salads are a diet minefield, smothered in high-fat dressing and fried toppings. This is where reading the nutrition facts before you order can make a huge difference.

Tips for keeping fast food calories under control

Be careful when it comes to condiments and dressings. When choosing items, be aware of calorie- and fat-packed salad dressings, spreads, sauces, and sides such as sour cream. Mayonnaise- and oil-based sauces in particular add a lot of calories. Try holding the mayo and asking for a packet of ketchup or mustard you can add yourself-controlling how much you put on your sandwich.

Stick to zero-calorie beverages. Soda is a huge source of hidden calories. The average large soda packs around 300 calories, which can quickly gulp up a big portion of your daily calorie intake. Shakes are even worse, with up to 800 calories and a day's worth of saturated fat. And don't be fooled by lemonade and fruit drinks, which add calories and sugar without much in the way of nutrients. Order water, diet soda, or unsweetened tea instead.

Be wise about sides. Watch menu items that come with one or more side dishes. Sides that can quickly send calories soaring include fries, chips, rice, noodles, onion rings, coleslaw, macaroni and cheese, biscuits, and mashed potatoes with gravy. Better bets are side salads with light dressing, baked potato (easy on the toppings), fresh fruit cups, corn on the cob, or apple slices.

Pass on the French fries. Do you really need those fries? A sandwich or burger should be plenty filling on its own. Or if your meal doesn't sound complete without fries, choose the smallest size (which can be 400 calories less than a large serving).

Skip the bacon. It's always tempting to add bacon to sandwiches and salads for extra

flavor, but bacon has very few nutrients and is high in fat and calories. Instead, try ordering extra pickles, onions, lettuce, tomatoes, or mustard to add flavor without the fat.

Make sure your fast food salad isn't a stealth diet saboteur

- Choose low-fat and fat-free dressing and ask for it on the side, so you can control how much you use.
- Skip high-fat toppings such as bacon bits, cheese, croutons, and crispy noodles. They can add hundreds of calories!
- Avoid taco salads. The deep-fried shells, tortilla chips, cheese, and sour cream make them high-fat, high-calorie diet busters.
- Choose salads with grilled chicken, shrimp, or vegetables. Avoid salads with breaded chicken or other fried toppings.

Healthy fast food at burger chains

The typical fast food meal of a burger, fries, and a drink can easily add up to a whole day's worth of calories. That's a nutritional (and weight control) recipe for disaster. The burger alone at many fast food joints can pack between 1,000-2,000 calories, particularly when loaded up with extra patties, bacon, and cheese.

To keep calories and fat down, you also should pay particular attention to portion sizes and high-fat toppings and sides. Everything that you add to your meal counts—from fries to soda or a shake.

Tips for making healthier choices at fast food burger joints:

Stick to a single hamburger patty. No double or triple burgers! Burgers with two or three beef patties add loads of unnecessary calories and unhealthy fat (up to 800 calories and 40 grams of fat).

Hold or go light on the mayonnaise. You can eliminate around 100 calories. Add extra ketchup or mustard if you need a flavor kick.

Go easy on special sauces, which add a lot of calories. If you don't want to do without, ask for the sauce on the side. A little goes a long way.

Say no to bacon, cheese, onion rings, and other calorie-laden burger toppings. If you want to add some interest, go with extra pickles or heart-healthy avocado.

Ask about no-meat burger or sandwich options, such as the veggie burger at Burger

King or the grilled cheese at In-N-Out Burger.

Skip the fries. You'll save hundreds of calories (510 calories for a large McDonald's fries, 340 calories for a medium).

Check out the kid's menu. Junior and children's-sized hamburgers usually have between 250-300 calories, making them a healthier choice.

Healthier fast food burger options

INSTEAD OF	TRY
Double-patty cheeseburger	Regular, single-patty hamburger without cheese
French fries	Baked potato or a side salad
Chicken "nuggets" or tenders	Grilled chicken strips
Salad with toppings such as bacon, cheese, and ranch dressing	Garden salad with grilled chicken and low-fat dressing
Milkshake	Yogurt parfait or a vanilla sundae in a cup (no toppings or cone)

Healthy fast food at chicken chains

Chicken may sound healthier than beef, but when it comes to fast food, that's not always the case. Many menu items at chicken chains are higher in fat and sodium than a burger. That's not to say that you can't find healthier options, but don't assume that chicken means "healthy."

What kind of meat you order also matters. Chicken breast is highest in calories, followed closely by the thigh. Chicken wings and drumsticks are much lower in calories, making them smarter choices. If you prefer breast meat, you can make it healthier by taking off the skin.

Tips for making smarter choices at fast food chicken restaurants:

Choose baked, broiled, or grilled chicken over fried or breaded chicken. And don't even think about chicken nuggets, which are loaded as much fat and sodium as a burger.

Go easy on the honey mustard, barbecue sauce, and other special sauces. Each sauce packet adds around 60 calories.

Be wary of sides. Half the fun when ordering chicken are the sides: coleslaw, biscuits, baked beans, mac 'n cheese, and mashed potatoes. But these standard side dishes are all high in calories, so make sure to count them toward your meal.

Pass on the crispy chicken sandwich, which may be flavorful, but is fried and fatty. A much better choice is a grilled chicken sandwich. Order it skinless to make it even healthier.

Healthier fast food chicken options

INSTEAD OF	TRY
Fried chicken, original or extra-crispy	Skinless chicken breast without breading
Teriyaki wings or popcorn chicken	Honey BBQ chicken sandwich
Fried chicken sandwich	Grilled chicken sandwich
Chicken and biscuit “bowl”	Mashed potatoes
Adding extra gravy and sauces	Limiting gravy and sauces

Healthy fast food at Mexican chains

Mexican fast food restaurants can be a good option for finding healthy fast food. But they can also be caloric minefields—especially when it comes to burritos, nachos, and other cheese-heavy items. Portion control is also important, since the serving size on many Mexican fast food items is enormous. In order to enjoy what you want without blowing your diet, simply eat half and take the rest home for your next meal.

Several Mexican chains, including Taco Bell and Baja Fresh, have “healthy” menu options that are lower in fat and calories. You can also find healthier choices at chains such as Chipotle and Taco Del Mar, including whole-wheat tortillas and fresh vegetables. But portions are still huge, so limiting the amount you eat in one sitting is key.

Tips for making smarter choices at Mexican fast food restaurants:

Go easy on the rice and beans (including in your burrito). These starches add hundreds of calories to your meal.

Skip the sour cream, which can add 100-200 calories. For a healthier option, add avocado or guacamole.

Say no to chips. They add hundreds of calories (285 calories for a ½ order from Chipotle) and sodium you don’t need.

Look for Baja-style fish dishes. Fish is usually the healthiest meat choice—as long as it’s not fried.

Opt for soft tortillas. Whether made of flour or corn, soft tortillas are lower in fat and calories than crispy, deep-fried shells. Soft corn tortillas are usually healthier than soft flour tortillas.

Try holding the cheese. You may be surprised how little you miss it in your burrito or taco, and it can save you over 100 calories.

Load up on fajita veggies. Adding them to your burrito or burrito bowl is an easy way to add tons of flavor and heart-healthy vitamins and phytochemicals without adding a lot of calories.

Healthier Mexican fast food options

INSTEAD OF	TRY
Crispy shell taco	Soft taco
Ground beef or steak	Grilled fish or chicken
Refried beans or pinto beans	Black beans
Crunch wraps or gordita-type burritos	Grilled “fresco” style steak burrito
Beef or steak burrito	Veggie and bean burrito

Healthy fast food at sandwich chains

Thanks to Subway, sub sandwiches come to mind for many people when they think of “healthy” fast food. And while it is true that you can find relatively healthy choices at the top sandwich chains, their menus are not without their pitfalls. While sandwich shop ads promote their health benefits, studies have found that many people eat more calories per meal at a sub shop than at McDonald’s. This may be because people feel so virtuous eating “healthy” as the ads suggest, they reward themselves with chips, sodas, or extra condiments that can turn a healthy meal into an unhealthy one. You can make healthier choices at a deli or sub shop but you need to use some common sense.

Tips for making smarter choices at sandwich fast food joints:

Opt for the smaller sized subs. Ordering a 6-inch sub over the foot-long can save you between 500-700 calories.

Choose whole-grain buns or bread instead of white bread, French rolls, or cheese breads.

Go easy on the mayonnaise and condiments. You can save even more calories by asking for the condiments on the side.

Dress your sandwich with mustard, vinegar, or low-fat dressing instead of mayonnaise and calorie-heavy special sauces.

Go light on the cheese, or better yet, skip it altogether.

Eat half the sandwich at lunch and save the other half for later.

Load up on veggies, such as tomato, lettuce, pickles, onions, green and red peppers, and olives.

Skip the chips. Get something healthier on the side, such as an apple, a small side salad, or a yogurt.

Healthier fast food sandwich options

INSTEAD OF	TRY
Foot-long sub	Six-inch sub
High-fat meat such as ham, tuna salad, bacon, meatballs, or steak	Lean meat (roast beef, chicken breast, lean ham) or veggies
The “normal” amount of higher-fat (cheddar, American) cheese	One or two slices of lower-fat cheese (Swiss or mozzarella)
Keeping the sub “as is” with all toppings	Subbing out cheese and meat for extra veggie toppings
Choosing white bread or “wraps” which are often higher in fat than normal bread	Choosing whole-grain bread or taking the top slice off your sub and eating it open-faced

Healthy fast food at pizza chains

Pizza isn't considered health food—and for good reason. It's high in calories and typically loaded with fatty meats and cheese with little nutritional value. Two slices can easily add up to 600 calories and more than a full day's worth of sodium. But it is possible to indulge in pizza now and again without completely undoing your healthy diet. However, there's no good way to avoid the high sodium, so try to limit your sodium intake in the meals leading up to and following your pizza outing.

It's also important to pay attention to portion sizes. This means limiting the number of slices you eat, but not all slices are equal. Be aware that a large slice of pizza is almost 40% bigger than a medium slice of pizza, with the corresponding calorie bump. And don't be fooled by the personal pan pizza, which are usually 800 calories or more. If you do choose a personal pizza, eat half and save the rest for later.

Tips for making smarter choices at pizza joints:

Order thin crust instead of regular crust (and avoid deep-dish or pan pizza). Not only is thin crust the healthiest option, but it's also the most authentic version of a true Italian pie.

Order your pizza with light cheese. A little cheese can go a long way! You can also try

substituting lower-calorie ricotta cheese for mozzarella. At the very least, don't order extra cheese.

Load your pizza up with veggie toppings. Most chains have lots of healthy options, including tomato, peppers, mushrooms, spinach, artichoke, garlic, onion, and broccoli.

Limit high-fat meat toppings, such as pepperoni, bacon, sausage, Philly meat, ham, and beef. If you must have meat, stick to chicken.

Avoid pasta, which tends to be less healthy than the pizza at fast food joints. Fast food pasta dishes are usually little more than a heaping serving of refined-carb noodles and meat-heavy sauces.

Skip the sides. Say no to garlic knots, mozzarella sticks, and cheesy bread. You'll cut out a lot of calories, carbs, and unhealthy fat.

Healthier pizza and Italian fast food options

INSTEAD OF	TRY
Cheese-filled or deep dish pizza	Thin-crust pizza (whole-wheat, if available)
Meat lover's pizza	Veggie lover's pizza
Pepperoni, meatballs, or sausage toppings	Chicken
Bacon	Canadian bacon (60% less fat than regular bacon)
Garlic or "cheesy" bread	Plain rolls or breadsticks

Healthy fast food at Asian chains

Asian fast food may sound healthier than your typical burger or fast food sandwich. After all, you can usually get a decent amount of veggies. But if you're not careful, you can end up with a meal that's much higher in calories and fat than you may realize. If you're smart about what you order, you can minimize the diet-busting damage, but Asian fast food also tends to be very high in sodium. And unfortunately, there's not much you can do about that—which makes Asian fast food best for the occasional indulgence, not a regular habit.

Tips for making smarter choices at Asian fast food restaurants:

Go easy on the rice, which packs on carbs and calories. Pass on fried rice, which is high in fat, calories, and sodium. Steamed white rice is a much healthier choice, and brown rice even better.

Limit the noodles. Fried Asian noodles add a lot of calories, carbs, and sodium, plus

unhealthy fat. Stick to small portions of lo mein, chow mein, and chow fun, or avoid them altogether.

Say no to pork dishes, which tend to be higher in fat than other meat options.

Avoid sauce heavy dishes, such as orange chicken and Beijing beef. It's also a good idea to pass on anything with General Tso's, Kung Pao, BBQ, or Sweet and Sour in the name. These sauces are high in calories and sugar.

Skip the fatty, deep-fried sides, such as fried wontons, egg rolls, tempura, BBQ spareribs, and crab Rangoon.

Use the chopsticks! You'll eat more slowly, since you can't grasp as much food with them at one time as you can with your normal fork and knife.

Healthier Asian fast food options

INSTEAD OF	TRY
Deep-fried starters (egg rolls, tempura, fried wontons, etc.)	Soup (good choices include egg drop, miso, wonton, or hot & sour soup)
Battered or deep-fried dishes (sweet and sour pork, General Tso's chicken)	Stir-fried, steamed, roasted or broiled dishes (chow mein, chop suey)
Fried rice	Steamed rice (brown instead of white rice, if that's an option)
Sweet and sour sauce or regular soy sauce	Hot chili sauce (a little goes a long ways) or low-sodium soy sauce
Meat-based dishes	Vegetable-based dishes

Healthy fast food breakfasts

We all know the importance of a healthy breakfast, but it's also the meal we usually have the least time for. And even though fast food isn't the healthiest option, it can be the most convenient one when you're running late for work or school.

However, many fast food breakfasts deliver a full day's worth of fat and enough saturated fat for three days. Many breakfast items are also obscenely high in sodium (even non-salty baked goods such as pastries and muffins). And that's to say nothing of calories, which can top 1,000. But you can find healthier choices on most menus. The key is to look for items with both fiber and protein—which makes them more filling and satisfying—but not too much fat.

Tips for making smarter fast food breakfast choices:

Avoid sausage, bacon, and steak. These meats are high in fat. Leaner breakfast meat choices include turkey, Canadian bacon, and ham.

Be careful when it comes to baked goods. Not only are most breakfast pastries, loafs, and muffins high in sugar, they also tend to be high in sodium.

Focus on fiber. Good choices include bran muffins, oatmeal, and granola. Just watch out for excess sugar.

Go easy on the cheese and breakfast sauces. Ask for the sauce on the side to keep the calories down.

Say no to the breakfast burrito. These diet-busters tend to be loaded with carbs, calories, sodium, and fat.

Choose toast or English muffins over biscuits. Biscuits are usually higher in calories and fat than toast or English muffins.

Healthier breakfast fast food options

INSTEAD OF	TRY
Bagel with cream cheese	English muffin with butter
Egg on a biscuit	Egg on wheat toast
Donut or pastry	Low-fat bran muffin
Smoothie	Yogurt with granola and fruit
French toast sticks or cinnamon roll	Oatmeal

Recommended reading

[Fast Food Nutrition](#) - Guide to healthy choices at fast food restaurants, including a meal calculator.

[Calorie King](#) - Menu guides with calorie counts, mobile apps for on the go help, and other weight loss tools.

[Calorie Count](#) - Explore a database of over 250,000 foods, including menu items at fast food chains.

[Calorie Lab](#) - Offers calorie and nutrition facts database, with information on the options at top chains across the U.S.

HelpGuide

[Healthy Dining Finder](#) - Nutritional analysis for hundreds of popular restaurants. (Healthy Dining)

[Tips for Eating Fast Food](#) - Suggestions and healthy substitutions for fast food restaurant items. (American Heart Association)

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