

How to Eat Out and Not Derail Your Healthy Eating Plan

Eating at restaurants offers plenty of perks — convenience, appealing options, fun with friends, a break from cooking — but it can also lead to serious pitfalls for your well-being.

These days, more of us are eating away from home a lot more often. To overcome the challenges of restaurant dining, it is important to know what you want to get out of a particular meal, strategies for navigating subpar dining options, and the hidden world of questionable food suppliers.

Know Your Goal

Some restaurant meals are about getting sustenance into your body, and others are special culinary adventures or celebrations of life. It helps to know in advance what kind of meal you're having, and to what extent your health priorities will drive your eating choices. Having high nutritional standards is smart; having an ironclad "all or nothing" approach to eating (total self-indulgence vs. total self-denial) may not be necessary, or even helpful. Decisions about whether or not to have wine and dessert, for example, or to partake of the signature house popovers may be best made occasion by occasion.

Where to Eat

In a world where the majority of restaurants are not at all designed with your health in mind, scoping out places that make meals from good, whole-food sources can be tricky. Farm-to-table, chef-driven, and authentic ethnic places tend to be among the best options, but also the hardest to find.

Beware of menu greenwashing: presenting industrial factory-farmed ingredients as "farm fresh" when they are not. Keep in mind, most run-of-the-mill restaurants get all their ingredients through supply chains fed by factory farms, feedlots, and commodity brokers.

Ordering Smart

Typical menu choices are packed with flour, sugar, dairy, industrial oils, and low-quality animal proteins. Multiple carb-heavy elements (breadsticks, toast, pasta, crackers, muffins) may come with your meal. Don't assume you'll get resistance if you request mixing-and-matching your way to a healthier plate. Can you find an unadulterated, simple piece of protein and surround it with some simple vegetables? Ask nicely, and you might be surprised by what's possible.

Even if you don't see anything promising on the menu, ask what types of vegetables are in the kitchen that day. Often, there's *something* back there.

Special-Menu Guidance

Beware menu items labeled "heart healthy" and "low-cal." They tend to be carb-heavy, low-fat nutritional disasters. Before you request a gluten-free menu, see what's on the regular menu, so you know what additional elements might be available for your mix-and-match choices. However you choose to eat, know that finding and asking for what you want gets easier with practice. And the special orders you request today may very well help drive tomorrow's healthy restaurant trends.

Off-menu

Don't be afraid to ask your server to help you healthy-up your meal. For example, you could ask for a salad in place of the usual fries or chips with a meal. If an entrée comes with a side of potato, rice, or pasta, consider swapping out the starchy option for a non-starchy vegetable. If you like the looks of a protein-based starter, order that (versus a less appealing entrée) and combine it with one or more veggie sides. Ask about available-but-not-listed fresh greens (like spinach) that could be simply sautéed and served with olive oil or butter and lemon. You can also ask for items to be prepared with less oil or cheese, ask the server to take away the bread basket and serve salad with dressing on the side, and request an appetizer portion of a main meal.

You can even often order "off-menu" — for example, ask what vegetarian dish the chef can prepare for you or if it's possible to make grilled chicken and steamed vegetables. Many restaurants are happy to comply.

If you enjoy dining out, don't think you have to stop if you want to stay healthy. With some preparation and savvy substitutions, you can order meals that are as nutritious as the ones you prepare at home.

Ask healthy friends for restaurant recommendations. If you're traveling, ask a local, or use desired search terms ("organic," "local," or "farm to table," for instance) in an app like Yelp.

What to Order When You Have to Eat Out

- ☐ Check restaurant menu on-line before arriving and plan your selections ahead of time
- ☐ Skip the bread basket
- ☐ If you are having a drink with dinner
 - ✓ choose wine over beer
 - ✓ a spirit on the rocks or with club soda rather than a cocktail with juice, tonic or other sugary addition
 - ✓ try to stick to one alcoholic drink
- ☐ Drink water (flat or bubbly) throughout your meal
- ☐ Order your appetizer first, then order your dinner
- ☐ Substitute a starchy side dish with another vegetable
- ☐ Either split your entree or ask your waiter to wrap up half to go
- ☐ If dessert, order some berries
 - ✓ keep in mind after **3 bites** there is no more enjoyment in the food you are eating
- ☐ Best to skip the coffee or tea so it does not interfere with your sleep

Specific Restaurant Dishes

PASTA: Swap the pasta for a beg of vegetables (such as spinach, zucchini or arugula). Watch for sugar added to tomato-based sauces.

SALADS: Ask for extra avocado or nuts and seeds as a replacement for fruit, dried fruit, or grains. For dressing, your best bet is olive oil and vinegar. Cobb salad is a great choice. Just ask for it without the corn.

PROTEINS: Choose fatty proteins like salmon, duck, lamb or pork short ribs. Fat is where toxins are stored, so if meat quality is questionable then opt for lean meats and add plant-based fats like avocado oil or olive oil.

STEAK: The fattiest steaks are filet mignon, New York strip, T-bone, and rib-eye steaks.

SUSHI: Get anything WITHOUT rice. Ask for a roll without rice but extra avocado.

BURGERS: Check that the patty is just meat (no oats, wheat germ, or other fillers). Ask that the bun be replaced with a lettuce wrap. Instead of fried, order a side salad.

CHICKEN: Choose grilled, broiled or roasted. Avoid anything breaded.

WINGS: Make sure they are not breaded or coated in flour, potato starch, etc. Might be best to skip altogether as many restaurants will use vegetable oils in its fryers.

MEXICAN: Ask for any dish without the tortillas, rice or beans. Ask for raw sliced vegetables for your guacamole. Meat platters are a good option. Skip the enchiladas as they are cooked in the tortillas and can't be separated. Try taco fillings over a bed of lettuce.

INDIAN: Ask for curry options that are not thickened with flour. Replace bread and rice with fresh vegetable sticks. Watch vegetable-based curries as they are often packed with high-carb ingredients. Try cauliflower or mushroom, bhaji, chicken korma, shahi paneer, or chicken shorba.

CHINESE: Chinese food is tricky, as everything has sauce and likely sugar. Try duck meat, sautéed and server over raw bean sprouts or a fresh salad.

TAPAS: Generally, tapas dishes are low in carbohydrates and more meat-based. Avoid bread-based dishes and look for plates made up of meat and vegetables.

CAFES: Ask if the café has unsweetened coconut milk or almond milk or unsweetened brewed tea (hot or cold). Try a decaf Americano misto made with coconut milk.

What to Order at an **American Bistro**

Protein (meat, fish, chicken, eggs, tofu—4 to 6 ounces)
Veggies cooked in olive oil
Salad with full-fat dressing (oil and vinegar)
Beans and/or small serving of whole grains
Soup
Dessert: fresh berries with dark chocolate and nuts

What to Order at a **Mediterranean, Greek or Italian** Restaurant

Fresh fish, chicken or meat (not breaded)
Vegetable side dishes cooked or dressed in olive oil
Hummus or lentil salad (no pita—eat with fresh carrots, celery, radishes, sliced red pepper or other veggies)
Olive tapenade
Olives and feta
Greek salad
Tabbouleh (with bulgur wheat)
Dessert: fruit with unsweetened Greek yogurt and a touch of honey (optional)

What to Order at an **Asian** Restaurant

Curry with tofu, meat, chicken or fish (no rice)
Sashimi (rather than sushi, which includes sweetened white rice)
Miso or coconut milk-based soup
Sautéed greens
Brown rice (if available)
Dessert: fruit

What to Order at a **Mexican** Restaurant

- Fajitas, usually lettuce leaves instead of tortilla
“Deconstructed” burrito
o a bowl with beans, chicken, veggies, cheese, guacamole, lettuce, tomatoes, sour cream
Chili or black bean soup topped with sour cream or cheese
Guacamole with radishes, fennel, cucumbers, jicama or any other “snappy” vegetables
Brown rice (if available)

What to Order at **Salad Bars**

Chicken, tuna, tofu
Sardines (or stash a can in your bag for emergencies), smoked salmon
Boiled egg
Any and all non-starchy vegetables
Nuts
Beans (chickpeas, hummus, lentils, black beans)
Avocado
Olives
Shredded cheese, cottage cheese
Whole grains (wheat berries or quinoa)
Full-fat dressings (without added sugar), olive and vinegar is best option
Soups (not potato based)
Dessert: fruit (pour cream from the coffee station on top)

Fast Food....If you really have to

You are absolutely determined to lose extra weight for good. Wherever you are, you can find a healthy meal that has some protein and won't make you gain weight. Just stay calm so you can make a good choice. Here are some suggestions for the top 6 fast food restaurants

McDonald's

Some people may blame it for America's obesity epidemic, but the country's top hamburger restaurant actually offers some choices you can live with. Skip bacon, fries, sauces and dressings, anything with double or triple the meat, and anything labeled "crispy". You can always get away with ordering a burger or sandwich without the bun or bread, or eating just the filling from a snack wrap. The following are good bets:

- An egg white delight muffin, with or without the English muffin, for breakfast
- A Fruit 'n' Yogurt Parfait without the granola topping or oatmeal with apples and without cream, for breakfast
- A grilled sweet chili or Southwest chicken snack wrap without ranch sauce and without the tortilla
- A grilled chicken sandwich, hamburger, or cheeseburger without the bun or bread
- A salad with grilled chicken
- Apple slices or a tangerine on the side

Subway

Subway can live up to its reputation of being a weight loss-friendly restaurant, but not all menu items are good choices for your diet. Watch out for their breads—none are whole grain—and skip the pizza. Also, beware of fatty fillings like seafood and tuna salad and meatballs. Of course, stay away from sides and desserts like chips and cookies. The following are good bets:

- Egg white and ham on flatbread (or just eat the filling without the bread) for breakfast
- Salads with lean proteins like black forest ham, oven roasted chicken breast, turkey breast, a veggie patty, steak, or ham
- Apple slices and water to go with your meal
- Tons of veggies to make your sandwich more filling and nutritious but still low-calories
- Mustard, balsamic vinegar or a fat-free sauce

Starbucks

Don't blow your diet on a beverage. If you are not careful, you could get 600 calories and 80 grams of carbohydrates from a single drink at Starbucks. And the baked goods? Best not to even look at them. The following are good bets:

- Decaffeinated coffee or tea without milk or whipped cream. Use almond milk and sugar-free syrup if you want to jazz up your beverage
- Spinach and feta breakfast wrap, egg and cheddar breakfast sandwich, or reduced-fat turkey bacon breakfast sandwich without the tortilla or bread
- Fresh fruit
- Chicken and hummus bistro box

Wendy's

Like McDonald's, Wendy's is another hamburger restaurant that can really do some damage if you are not careful—but you can get away with a high-protein, low-calorie meal if you do your homework first. Stick to “Jr” sized burgers and skip the fries, chicken nuggets, fried chicken and bacon. The following are good bets:

- Salads with grilled chicken and without high-calorie dressings or toppings
- Jr. burgers and cheeseburgers and grilled chicken sandwiches and wraps without the bun or bread and with mustard instead of a fatty or sugary sauce or dressing
- A side salad and apple sauce
- Unsweetened iced tea

Burger King

What can we say? Americans like their hamburgers. Burger King is the third hamburger restaurant that ranks in the top five fast food chains in the US. You know the drill. Skip the bacon, fries, onion rings, double and triple burgers, and crispy chicken, and don't even think about sundaes, shakes or pies—unless you want to feel sick from the sugar. There are plenty of options for high-protein meals as long as you skip the bun. The following are good bets:

- Maple flavored oatmeal with apple slices for breakfast
- Ham, egg, and cheese biscuit without the biscuit for breakfast
- Jumbo hot ham and cheese sandwich without the hoagie bun and with mustard instead of mayo
- Tendergrill chicken sandwich, veggie burger, or Whopper Jr. without a bun or mayo
- Side salad
- Chicken, apple, and cranberry salad without the cranberries, or chicken Caesar salad without the croutons

Taco Bell

As with the other restaurants, you can get in big trouble at Taco Bell, or you can get a good deal. Stick to the smaller menu items and choose from the Fresco menu to get items under 350 calories. Taco Bell offers plenty of high-protein menu items, but you're better off skipping the tortillas, taco shells, taco shells, and tortilla chips. The following are good bets.

- AM Grilled Taco or Crunchwrap without the burrito or taco shell, if you must get breakfast at Taco Bell
- Chicken taco or burrito without the tortilla or taco shell
- Salsa, pico de gallo, hot sauce, red sauce, or pizza sauce
- Fresco grilled steak or chicken soft taco
- Fiesta taco salad with chicken or steak and without rice—don't eat the shell