

Drive-Thru Nutrition

Food That's Fast and Healthy

Having spent a week on a road trip, I learned one thing along the way: Fast food is unavoidable, given time and budget constraints. You can't beat a drive-thru for convenience and speed of service. But the bellyache you get afterward can quickly remind you of the excess calories, fat, cholesterol, and sodium you just put into your body.

While a super-sized value meal can give you a day's worth of calories in a single meal, you *can* exit the drive-thru with a healthier meal. And for the times when there is nothing better than hot French fries or a juicy burger, it's important to learn how to make good choices.

Drinks

It might only cost a few dimes more to guzzle down a large soda instead of a small one, but [your waistline will be paying the real price](#). Soda—diet or regular—[isn't a healthy choice](#) since it provides calories, but no real nutrition at all. Soda is often filled with sugar (or artificial sweeteners), and other ingredients that fill you up without giving your body any benefits. One way to make a fast food meal healthier is to opt for a drink other than soda. Of course, water is a great choice to hydrate your body and aid digestion. Unsweetened tea is virtually calorie-free if you want something other than water. Juice (100% fruit juice, not "fruit drinks") and low-fat milk are two alternatives that add nutrition to the calories you drink, making them healthier choices than soda and other sweet beverages. If you must go with soda, opt for the smallest size available.

Fruits and Vegetables

Just as you would at any other meal, try to include at least one serving of fruits or vegetables with your order. (And no, French fries do NOT count as a healthy vegetable!) Load your burger with extra tomatoes, or enjoy a side of fresh fruit instead of fries or chips. If you are having a sandwich, load up on lettuce, peppers—even cucumbers. If they offer it, opt for a baked potato (nix the high-calorie toppings like cheese and sour cream) instead of fries.

Most fast food chains now offer delicious side and entrée salads. Including these with your meal is a great way to add lots of vitamins and filling fiber for just a few calories. Just make sure not to smother your greens with cheese, eggs, bacon, high-fat dressing, or fried toppings, such as chicken and croutons.

And don't forget about the healthy sides that are staples at fast food joints these days. Apple slices, baby carrots, and more are often available. And if you don't see them on the menu, ask!

Portion Control

One of the biggest problems people face when eating fast food is the out-of-control portions. You don't have to order the value meal with the big burger, bigger fries and biggest drink. Instead, try a child-sized meal. You still get the burger, fries, and drink, but consume about half of the fat of the full-sized version. Ordering small is automatic portion control—you won't be tempted to overeat.

If a kiddie-sized meal with a toy on the side isn't for you, split your order of fries with a friend. You'll still enjoy that salty crunch without consuming all of the calories and fat of a full order.

Extras

The "extras" can add on the calories and fat. A tablespoon of mayo will add on an extra 57 calories. Add 106 more calories for a single slice of cheese! Instead of smothering your burger with sauces, opt for mustard (about 10 calories). Forgo the sour cream and three kinds of cheese on your taco, and add flavor with low-calorie salsa. Go easy on the ranch dressing and salt shaker, too. These little substitutions can really add up! Your taste buds will be happy (and so will your waistline).

Don't be fooled by healthier sounding meats, either. While breaded chicken or fish may seem healthier than a beefy burger, these sandwiches often contain just as many, if not more, calories than your average burger since they're fried in oil (and absorb a lot of that fat). Try *grilled* versions of your favorite sandwiches instead, or opt for the low-cal veggie burger, which is becoming more widely available these days.

Breakfast

A healthy breakfast is the best way to start your day. But while hitting the drive-thru on the way to work may be convenient, it might put you at a calorie overload early in the day. Making healthy, nutritious choices comes into play again. Instead of a breakfast sandwich (English muffin with eggs, bacon, and cheese), order a bowl of fresh fruit, a fruit and yogurt parfait, oatmeal, cereal with milk or plain eggs. That way, you'll be starting your day off on the right foot.

Comparisons

See how many calories and fat grams you can save just by trying different menu options at some of your favorite fast food restaurants. (All nutritional information comes from each restaurant's website.)

Restaurant	Think Again	Better Choice	You Save
<i>Arby's</i>	Beef 'n Cheddar 440 calories 21 grams fat	Junior Roast Beef 270 calories 9 grams fat	170 calories 12 grams fat
<i>Burger King</i>	Original Whopper 700 calories 39 grams fat	Hamburger 310 calories 12 grams fat	390 calories 27 grams fat
<i>Hardee's</i>	Double Thickburger 1240 calories 90 grams fat	Thickburger 850 calories 57 grams fat	390 calories 33 grams fat
<i>McDonald's</i>	Big Mac 560 calories 30 grams fat	Hamburger 260 calories 9 grams fat	300 calories 21 grams fat
<i>Sonic</i>	SuperSonic Cheeseburger 839 calories 55 grams fat	Jr. Burger 353 calories 21 grams fat	486 calories 34 grams fat
<i>Wendy's</i>	Big Bacon Classic 580 calories 29 grams fat	Jr. Hamburger 280 calories 9 grams fat	300 calories 20 grams fat