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Life In the Fast Lane

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Though it may seem like finding healthy fast food choices is akin to looking for a needle in a haystack, the reality is that fast food is a dining way of life for many busy families.

Make no mistake about it, salt, fat and sugar sell. Fast food is attractive because it's cheap and it tastes good, yet most fast food meals are loaded with more sugar, fat, calories and salt than most people should have in an entire day. A large soda, for example can pack $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of sugar, and many of the burgers and fries "super combos" stuff a whopping $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of fat into our arteries. And while many of the industry's attempts at "going healthy" have tanked (think back to the McLean Deluxe, or Taco Bell's Border Light Menu) it is possible to find a few redeeming options in our fast food nation. While all fast food chains serve up their own nutritional nightmares, some do better than others when it comes to serving up healthier choices. Wendy's, Subway, Taco Bell, for example, have a decent array of healthy fare, which makes them a more attractive stop when trying to find a decent meal on the road.

One of the biggest problems with eating out is portion sizes. With everything turning "supersized" these days many of the "value meals" can gobble up a day's worth of calories at one sitting. An average "super combo" of a double burger, fries and drink, for example, provides about 1,800 calories, 17 teaspoons of fat and $\frac{3}{4}$ cup sugar. Would you like a coronary bypass with that?

Sticking to the smaller burgers, fries and drinks is one easy way to limit the amount of calories. A McDonald's hamburger is 260 calories and 9 grams of fat (one of your lowest calorie picks at the Golden Arches), while the Big Mac weighs in at 560 calories and 31 grams of artery-clogging fat. To further trim calories, ask for them to give you the equivalent of a "mini me" portion of fries and a soda- this can cut calories in half and, in the case of the fries, trim fat as well. Better yet, opt to drink water, milk or even diet soda in lieu of the sugary stuff.

Holding the mayo on your sandwiches is another key- it will save you roughly 120 calories and 11 grams of fat. A BK Broiler, for example, is only 370 calories and has 9 gms of fat if you skip the creamy stuff, but packs a hefty 530 calories and 20 grams of fat if you keep the mayo on your bun. Skip the cheese as well and save close to 100 calories and 7 grams of fat per slice. And it goes without saying that any bacon-laden concoction is surely going to cause the fat and calories to skyrocket.

What are your best picks? Wendy's scores high points for its salad bar, baked spuds and Fresh Stuffed Pita line. They also pack more than just iceberg lettuce into their salad and pitas, giving you a bit of cabbage, carrots, cucumbers and red onion for a nutritional boost. For a treat that's under 500 calories try their Broccoli and Cheese potato;



add a trip to the salad bar (go lightly on the dressing) and you can actually walk away with a decent meal.

If you think salads always trump other choices at fast food restaurants, think again. Many are loaded with high fat cheese, croutons and dressing that can make it look the same as a Quarter Pounder to your heart. Salads can sometimes even be the worst choices. For example, the Taco Bell Taco salad is the highest calorie, highest fat item on their menu with 850 calories and 52 grams of fat. Take away the shell and it's 430 calories, 22 gms fat, still no nutritional bargain. Their the Bean Burrito or Grilled Steak Soft would be a better bet- each with roughly 400 calories and 14 grams of fat.

In general, keep a light hand when it comes to the dressing at any restaurant, as 4 tablespoons can add anywhere from 15-35 grams of fat as well as a hefty dose of calories and sodium.

Subway is perhaps my favorite choice when it comes to fast food options, as they offer 7 sandwiches with less than 6 grams of fat, offer whole wheat sub rolls, and have nutritional information easily available to the customer. If you steer clear of the cheese, mayo and oils, and pack on the veggies, you can actually walk away with something that's good for you.

Other strategies at fast food restaurants include skipping the heart stopping fries and ordering water or milk with your burger. If you must indulge, consider splitting a portion among several people. This will save you fat and sugar calories. If you are an ardent fast foodie and looking for more information, you may want to pick up a guide that gives you creative ways to still dine out but stay lean, such as *Dining Lean* or *How to Stay Healthy & Fit on the Road* by Joanne V. Lichten, PhD, RD.