Dining out’s effects on health

Hey Alice,

Most of my friends and I often eat out for many of our meals. What are the effects of this trend on health?

— Out to lunch bunch

Answer

Dear Out to lunch bunch,

Restaurants, fast food joints, and delis are often convenient for a quick meal and provide a welcome opportunity to socialize. However, there are a couple of ways in which eating out may be less than favorable for your health. The specific effects will vary depending on the type of restaurants and dishes you choose, which is why educating yourself is a great place to start. Here are some reasons why eating out can make it hard to maintain a healthy and balanced diet:

- **Calorie overload**: While restaurants and fast food joints have a knack for making tasty and unique foods, the dishes often have more calories than meals you’d make at home. Researchers studying chain restaurants found that the average entrée had 674 calories, the average side had 260 calories, the average beverage had 419 calories, and the average dessert had 429 calories. A bit of math reveals that a single meal out could add up to over 1,000 calories! Depending upon your specific caloric needs, you could be knocking out half of your recommended daily caloric intake with a single meal. Fortunately, many restaurants make calorie information available, which can be a useful resource if you’re eating out often.

- **Mega portions**: One of the reasons restaurant food is often higher in calories is because of the large portions. Have you ever felt like your eyes were bigger than your stomach? You’re not alone. It’s been well established that when people are presented with large portions, many will eat far beyond the point of feeling full. Large restaurant portions can make it easy for you to fall into overeating without even realizing it.

- **Scads of salt**: The sodium content of food in eating establishments is often sky high: 1,848 mg per 1000 calories in a fast food joint, and 2,090 mg per 1,000 calories at a sit-down restaurant. Those numbers are creeping up on the recommended daily limit of 2300 mg per
day, so looking for dishes containing lower amounts of sodium can help you keep your levels in check.

The type of restaurants you frequent also matters as far as health risks are concerned. For those who are into the burgers-and-fries joints, research shows an increased risk of obesity and type 2 diabetes, as well as an overall lowered intake of key nutrients. For those who prefer fast-food restaurants that primarily serve sandwiches and subs, there tends to be increased intake of fat and sodium. (However, weight gain has not been associated with consumption of foods from these establishments). Finally, for those heading off to full-service restaurants, studies show that even though you’re probably consuming adequate amounts of fruits and veggies, you’re exposed to high sodium content, which increases your risk of developing high blood pressure.

If you’re ever interested in trying your hand in the kitchen to avoid some of these health risks of eating out, you can read No time to cook [2] or visit ChooseMyPlate.gov [3] for some ideas on quick and nutritionally-balanced meals you can make. Additionally, here are a couple of ideas on ways to make more healthful choices when you do go out:

- Order water, low-fat or fat-free milk, or unsweetened tea to drink in order to avoid beverages with lots of added sugar.
- Ask for whole-wheat bread for sandwiches.
- Start with a salad packed with veggies to help control hunger and feel satisfied sooner.
- Ask for dressings to be served on the side so that you can have control over how much you use, add little or no butter to your food, and avoid dishes with creamy sauces or gravies.
- Choose main dishes with lots of veggies.
- Order steamed, grilled, or broiled dishes instead of those that are fried or sautéed.
- At buffet restaurants, order an item from the menu instead of going for the all-you-can-eat option.
- Choose fruits for dessert.
- If the portions at a restaurant are larger than you want, split it with a friend, order an appetizer-sized portion, take leftovers home, and remember that you don’t have to “clean your plate.”
- Pack a healthy snack for yourself (e.g., fresh fruit, veggies, or a handful of nuts) if you’re going to be out and about to avoid stopping to buy an unhealthy snack.

List adapted from ChooseMyPlate.gov [4].

Finally, whether you choose to eat out regularly or just for the occasional treat, a strategy known as “mindful eating” might be a handy tool. Mindful eating involves actively making yourself aware of why and how you are consuming food and the way your body feels when eating. Are you consciously aware of when you’ve eaten your fill, or is eating more of an automatic reflex? Asking yourself questions like this may help you make more balanced menu choices and avoid the some of negative effects of eating out, although further research on mindful eating is still emerging.

There’s certainly a lot of information to digest on the effects of eating out! But whether you’re eating on the run or whipping up a meal at home, maintaining a balanced diet with plenty of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains is key. As they say, everything in moderation!

Alice!
Category: