



HEALTHY FAST FOODS?

Fast foods are quick, reasonably priced, and readily available alternatives to home cooking. Fast foods are typically high in calories, fat, saturated fat, sugar, and salt. In spite of their known nutritional inadequacies, fast foods are here to stay. Simply cutting them out of the diet totally seems unlikely for a variety of reasons. Some people find them simply appetizing and difficult to resist. For some, they are the first option because of their convenience, the ease in which they are obtained are often the more economical of the available ready-to-eat foods. In our hectic fast-paced lives, fast foods are becoming a norm rather than a luxury. Fast foods consumption has become an almost weekly and in some cases daily event in many lives.

This trend is worrying as increased consumption of these meals have been implicated in the rising prevalence of obesity and

obesity-related diseases seen throughout the world. Many fast food restaurants are hearing consumers' complaints; some have even been defendants in law suits because of their obesity promoting foods. This has led to an increase in the availability of "healthier" fast food options.

But can fast food truly be healthy? Is there such a thing as a healthy fast food? Of course!



Some of the healthiest fast foods available have been around for centuries. What could be healthier than a fresh picked fruit or faster for that matter? Fruits and some vegetables may be eaten raw

as a part of a healthy well balanced diet. However, while fresh fruits can be quite satisfying and are sometimes used to replace meals, very few persons see them as more than a snack, or something to be eaten in addition to "food".

Nonetheless, there are healthy fast foods. All foods by virtue of the fact that they provide nutrients (in some cases a nutrient) are nutritious, and in the correct amounts or context can in fact be part of a healthy well balanced diet. A fast food qualifies as part of a healthy diet if it:

- contributes to part of one or all of the basic food groups
 - o milk or dairy products
 - o servings of breads cereals/grains
 - o servings of fruits/ servings of vegetables
 - o servings of meat or meat substitutes to equal six ounces;

- allows you to keep the following nutrients low in the diet;
 - o sugars
 - o fat, especially saturated and trans fat
 - o salt
 - o calories
- Allows you to choose fewer calories and more nutrients.

Very few foods actually meet those guidelines. It's easy to find foods that fit into the basic food groups, but far more difficult to find ones that are low in sugars, fat, salt or calories. Even the tomato ketchup packet does not make the grade as it is high in sodium (67mg per pack).

However, if the following guidelines are followed they could significantly decrease your consumption of fats, sugars and sodium and therefore ensure a more healthful meal.

To reduce fats, saturated fats and cholesterol:

- choose plain burgers and beef sandwiches; leave off the sauce, mayonnaise, cheese and bacon;
- avoid fried foods – fish, French fries, onion rings, etc.;
- select broiled, baked or poached instead of fried;
- drink water, tea, coffee or low fat milk;
- skip croissants and biscuits;
- Eat raw veggies and green salads without dressing;
- choose small portions (the kiddie portions can be quite satisfying for adults);
- skip dessert;

- avoid coffee “whiteners” or creamers;

To limit sugar:

- use less ketchup (yes its high in sugar too) pickle relish, jelly, honey, BBQ sauce, etc.;
- avoid gelatin salads;
- avoid sweetened fruits at the salad bar – use fresh fruit instead;
- avoid sweetened soft drinks and shakes – ask for milk, water, tea or coffee;
- skip sweet desserts (the apple pies and cakes etc);

To limit sodium

- no pickles;
- limit salad dressings – use a lemon wedge instead;
- some diet sodas have sodium;
- avoid restructured poultry and meat (e.g. chicken nuggets);
- limit sausage, ham, bacon and biscuits;
- ask for fries without salt;
- use salt sparingly;
- limit cheese;

In addition to avoiding some nutrients, prudent fast food choices can be made to increase some nutrients that are usually lacking in the diet. For example you can improve the fibre content of your diet by:-

- choosing fresh vegetables and fruits at the salad bar;

- selecting sandwiches with tomatoes and lettuce;
- choosing whole grain or multi-grain buns/breads;
- eating baked potatoes and the skins – remember to limit the high fat high salt toppings;
- choosing foods which include beans – burritos, chilli, and salad bar toppings.

Still worried that to eat healthy at a fast food restaurant you are limiting yourself to salads and water? That is not actually a bad idea; in fact, salads are an excellent source of vitamins, minerals and fibre. They are also low in calories, provided you stay away from the high fat dressings. Salads can be quite filling and tasty especially the newer varieties available that may include pieces of grilled chicken or fish for a more complete nutritional meal. But you can choose your favourite foods and still be healthful.

For example at KFC a meal of 2 pieces Fried Chicken (Breast and Wing), Buttermilk Biscuit, Mashed Potatoes and Gravy, Corn-on-the-Cob, 16 oz. soda (KFC), comprises nutrients and calories as follows (Meal 1):

<i>This Meal (1):</i>	<i>Recommended Daily Intake:</i>
1,232 calories	2,000-2,700 calories
57 g fat	No more than 50-80 g
157 mg cholesterol	No more than 300 mg
2,276 mg sodium	No more than 1,100 -3,300 mg

As shown, this meal provided more than half of your daily

caloric requirement. A healthier alternative would be: 1 piece Fried Chicken (Wing), Mashed Potatoes and Gravy, Cole Slaw, 16 oz. diet soda (KFC), with calories and nutrients as follows (Meal 2).

<i>This Meal (2):</i>	<i>Recommended Daily Intake :</i>
373 calories	2,000-2,700 calories
19 g fat	No more than 50 -80 g
46 mg cholesterol	No more than 300 mg
943 mg sodium	No more than 1,100 -3,300 mg

This meal has far less calories, fat, cholesterol and sodium and provides some fibre from the coleslaw. Substituting a no sugar added fruit juice for the diet soda, would increase the calories but provide many necessary vitamins and minerals.

Similarly more healthful choices maybe made for hamburgers. A meal comprising a Quarter-Pound Cheeseburger, Large Fries, and 16 oz. soda (McDonald's) has calories and nutrients as follows (meal 3).

<i>This Meal (3):</i>	<i>Recommended Daily Intake:</i>
1,166 calories	2,000-2,700 calories
51 g fat	No more than 50 -80 g
95 mg cholesterol	No more than 300 mg
1,450 mg sodium	No more than 1,100 -3,300 mg

A better choice is: a Hamburger, Small Fries, 16 oz. soda (McDonald's), with calories/ nutrients as follows (meal 4).

<i>This Meal (4):</i>	<i>Recommended Daily Intake:</i>
481 calories	2,000-2,700 calories
19 g fat	No more than 50 -80 g
30 mg cholesterol	No more than 300 mg
665 mg sodium	No more than 1,100 -3,300 mg

The fast foods that are indigenous to the various Caribbean territories such as patties in Jamaica, "doubles" in Trinidad and Tobago, "dhal puri" with chutney (sour) in Guyana, can also be quite healthy depending on the preparation methods and the amounts eaten. One beef pattie can form part of a healthful diet; an even healthier choice being one of the vegetable patties available or one in which the crust is made with whole wheat flour. One or two "doubles" can also be healthy especially if the channa (chick peas) is prepared with limited oil and most of the sauces are excluded. "Doubles" are an excellent source of fibre and protein but are high in fat as it is fried in oil. "Dhal puries" are quite healthful especially because of the peas and by themselves without a curry filling provide carbohydrates, proteins and fats.

Reliance on these local fast foods as well as other easily available ready prepared foods such as various peas soups, stews, etc., can lead to a more healthful diet than when the imported American fare is chosen. More local restaurants are now regularly offering quick, nutritious meals that resemble home cooking. ♦

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