

Strategies for Restaurant Meals

It is challenging to eat healthy when you eat out. Many restaurants serve too much food. Restaurant foods are frequently high in fats, salt and refined carbohydrates. If you only eat out occasionally, you may want to just enjoy it as a special treat. The more frequently you eat out, the more it helps to make wise choices. Here we will talk about some of the problems associated with eating out, and some strategies. As you read the following lists, see what resonates for you. Select a couple strategies that you think would have the most impact.

Potential Problems:

- You are hungry, and fill up on bread or chips before the meal even arrives.
- You find it difficult to stop eating when you are full – you keep eating until the plate is empty.
- The combination of bread/chips, appetizer, and meal is just too much.
- The dessert menu is too tempting.
- Portion sizes are big.
- The foods you prefer to eat are not available.
- Other: what other problems do you find when you eat in restaurants?

Possible Strategies

- Avoid excessive hunger – have a light snack before you go.
- Decide ahead of time how hungry you are and how much you will eat. Choose your entrée first, then decide what to have with it (ie if you will have bread/chips and if you will need an appetizer.)
- If you eat out frequently, find restaurants with a good selection of salads, fresh fruits, vegetables and ideally even whole grains.
- Make requests: ask to substitute a salad for fries, or ask that the extras be left off your plate.
- Choose what you really want and stop eating when you are full. Enjoy the taste fully.
- Other methods to reduce portion sizes are
 - Select smaller meals when available, or try two appetizers.
 - Split the entrée with someone or take half home (you can even package it before you start.)
 - Skip or split desserts. Skipping can be easier when you don't even look at the dessert menu.
- In general, it is helpful to avoid fried foods and foods with heavy (high fat) sauces and gravies.
- Choose water, sparkling water or iced tea as beverages most of the time. Avoid sodas and sweetened beverages.
- Chinese Food – have small portions of the rice with entrees that have lots of vegetables. Limit fried meats and sweet sauces (ie sweet and sour pork, orange chicken, etc).
- Mexican – have a soft shell taco, or half a burrito. With the plates, choose between the rice or tortilla. Skip the chips or limit yourself to a handful. Get whole beans when possible.
- Italian – bread and pasta is too much carbohydrate, especially since it is usually all refined. Watch portion sizes. Most Italian restaurants serve big portions of pasta. Try eating half or even less.
- Thai – Be aware that coconut sauces are high in calories and saturated fats, so small amounts can be filling. Have small amounts of rice and lots of vegetables.
- Pizza – be aware that pizza lies. It tells you that you need to eat more when you have actually had enough already. This food is calorie dense, so it is harder than most foods to use fullness to tell when you have had enough. Figure out how much is enough for you and stop at that amount, whether or not you feel hungry at the time. Try having a salad with it to round out the edges. Order pizza with vegetable toppings and keep meat toppings to a minimum. Try ordering it with half the cheese.
- Fast foods – get the smallest size you can. The super-sized versions are promoted as bargains, but they are no bargain for your health. Choose wisely – you can easily spend the whole day's calorie level at one time in a fast food restaurant, with enough saturated fats to last two weeks. Go for salads, grilled (not fried or breaded) skinless chicken sandwiches, regular sized burgers or roast beef sandwiches. Go easy on the regular salad dressings and fatty sauces. Limit jumbo or deluxe burgers, sandwiches, French fries and other foods.