

[IMAGE]

5 Smart Substitutions When Eating Out

By Editorial Staff

There's nothing wrong with the occasional treat-yourself trip to a fast-food or sit-down restaurant, but Americans are eating out at an ever-increasing (sometimes daily) rate, and usually paying the health consequences. It's tough enough finding healthy food when grocery shopping these days, but put your trust in the hands of a burger joint, a diner, a pizza parlor or the vast majority of other restaurants and you're generally asking for trouble. Here are five substitutions to infuse a little more health into your next dining experience away from home.

1. Skip the Fries

French fries and potato chips, two of the most common sides at fast-food and sit-down restaurants, contain little or no nutritional value and large quantities of fat (oil). But they certainly are popular, which is why potatoes (in the form of fries and chips) are among the most frequently consumed "vegetables." Skip the grease and go without if at a fast-food restaurant (most only offer fries, onion rings or other fried options, although some do offer sides of corn, beans or rice, which are definitely healthier than fries or chips). At sit-down restaurants, it should be even easier to replace the fries / chips with a side of rice, a small baked potato and/or some veggies.

2. Watch What You Drink

soda - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark Soft drinks are exactly what your body (and teeth) *don't* need, yet they are a staple beverage at fast-food and other restaurants. Water offers three distinct benefits by comparison: it doesn't cost you anything, it's calorie-free, and it doesn't contain any sugar. While calorie- and sugar-free sodas are available, research suggests they may still be dangerous because artificial sweeteners may condition you to crave sweets and overeat. And do you really need a 32-ounce drink (of anything) with your meal?

3. No Oversized Loads

hamburger - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark What's your average family meal at home like in terms of portion size? Unless you've purchased oversized plates, meals are generally within reason. Not so for an increasing number of fast-food chains and sit-down restaurants. "Super-sized" combo meals and 17-inch plates heaped with Thanksgiving-like portions are a recipe for weight gain. Stick to a reasonable portion size (or eat half and get the other half to go) and you won't have to unbutton the top button of your jeans midway through your meal.

4. Find a Veggie

veggie - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark Depending on the nature of the establishment, this can be fairly easy or a bit tricky, but either way, it's a worthy pursuit. Whether it's a hamburger with lettuce and tomato or a plate of pasta with broccoli, choose meals that have some natural color, courtesy of Mother Nature's best vegetables. A burger with cheese, a bun and nothing else or a plate of pasta with cheese and cream sauce are missing the color of nutrition your body needs. Pizza is even easier; add a few veggies along with your other favorite toppings.

5. Know What You're Ordering

nutrition facts - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark In the past few years, the majority of restaurants have begun (by mandate and/or choice) to reveal how nutritionally unsound some of their meal options are. This can range from providing complete nutritional facts to listing calorie counts on the menu. Doing so gives you the upper hand when it comes to choosing a healthy (or at least healthier) meal for you and your family. Visit the Web sites of your favorite restaurants or review the nutritional information in-house before ordering. You'll be surprised at how much fat, sodium and calories are in some of your favorites; perhaps they *won't* be your favorites after you learn what's in them and you'll steer toward lower-fat, lower-calorie, better-for-you selections instead.

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