

Fast Facts on Fast Food

Drive Through Without Bypassing Nutrition

By: Ellen Shanley and Colleen Thompson

OK, so for many teens, it's hard to bypass a fast food restaurant. It might be the local hang-out for teens; maybe your parents swear by fast food; or choices for restaurants are limited in your community. So if fast food is on your plate, here are some things to keep in mind when making healthy choices.

Watch out for "mega-sizing": Whether it's super or mega size, what's with the big servings? Restaurants entice consumers with the package deal, so that, for just a little more money, you get a lot more food—whether you need it or not. Be discriminating. Are you really that hungry? Why not share your mega meal with your buddy and really save some money? Or just get the smaller versions of these items. You'll end up spending less money, and you'll still feel satisfied.

Chicken and fish are not always the best choices: We tend to think poultry and fish are better for us than red meat. It's not necessarily so. Fast-food restaurants often bread and fry chicken and fish. The end product can have as much or more fat and calories than a hamburger. Choose chicken or fish that is broiled, baked, or grilled. If you're not sure how it's prepared, ask. Most fast-food restaurants have the nutrient content of their menu items either right in the restaurant or on their website. There are even apps for your cell phone that can tell you the nutrient info for some fast-food chains.

Order a side salad instead of fries: Salads are a great way to "beef" up your vegetable intake without the beef. Watch out, though. Salads can be a big calorie buster too. Heavy dressings and added items in salads, such as crispy strips, croutons, nuts, etc., can make a salad have as many calories as a burger and fries—or even more. Just two ounces of ranch dressing (about one of those packets) provides 20 grams of fat. That's as much as in a quarter-pounder. Go for the "lite" or reduced-fat dressings, or use less of the heavier ones. Make sure that your salad is heavier on the veggies than on the extras.

Specialty coffees: Coffee shops can be a fun place to hang out and have a cup of Joe with your buddies. Although a cup of coffee and a muffin as a snack sounds pretty good, the choices available these days can turn a cup of coffee and a muffin into a whole meal in terms of calories—but perhaps not a whole meal in terms of nutrition.

When ordering coffee, be sure that you know what you are getting when you place your order. Although coffee and tea don't have many calories, they do have caffeine. Caffeine can act as a diuretic, causing you to lose water from your body. In addition, caffeine can increase your heart rate and cause stomach upset, nausea, and headaches. Finally, once you start adding things to your coffee, such as milk and sugar, you can end up with unwanted calories or fat.

Specialty or gourmet coffees such as lattes can pack a punch as a result of added sugars and fat in the whole milk or cream.

Try different menu items: Many fast-food restaurants offer more than just burgers and fries. There are often nutritious choices, such as soup, baked potatoes, salads, yogurt, milk, or bagels.

Choose a nutritious thirst quencher: Teens today are getting over 10 percent of their daily calories from soda and other sweetened beverages. The soft drink industry is a huge one, spending billions of advertising dollars to get you to choose their product. Regardless of the flavor or the manufacturer of the product, most soft drinks are nutritionally about the same. They provide lots of calories in the form of added sugar, but few other nutrients. Some sodas, especially cola beverages, also contain caffeine, an addictive stimulant that you don't need.

Finally, many soft drinks (including diet soft drinks) contain quite a bit of the mineral phosphorus. Excess amounts of the form of phosphorus found in colas and root beer may cause your body to lose calcium.

Excerpted with permission from "Fueling the Teen Machine," by Ellen Shanley and Colleen Thompson (Bull Publishing), the ultimate guide to navigating the world of nutrition and health and figuring out how to keep teen bodies healthy, strong, and happy.