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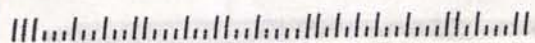


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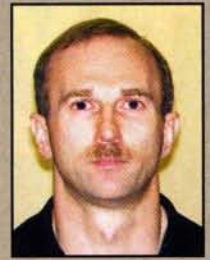
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Fast Foods, Slow Choices

By Matt Brzycki



When competing at meets or tournaments away from home, you and your teammates probably eat fast food on a fairly regular basis. And you are not alone. It has been said that each day, one out of every four Americans eats fast food. No wonder: Currently, there are more than 300,000 fast-food restaurants in the United States – just about one restaurant for every scholastic and collegiate wrestler in the country.

The good news is that fast food is inexpensive, convenient and, of course, fast. But the bad news is that, for the most part, it is not very healthy or nutritious. Fast food tends to be high in calories, fat and sodium. In fact, research has shown that on the days that people eat fast food, they tend to consume more calories and fat than on other days.

HEALTHY CHOICES

Believe it or not, there are healthy tactics that you can employ when eating fast food. Since fast foods are so widespread and can vary so much from one restaurant to another, it is well beyond the scope of this article to offer you a detailed list of specific suggestions. However, here are some general suggestions that you will find useful in your quest to make healthy choices at fast-food restaurants:

Reduce Fat

Fast food is often synonymous with fat food. In general, you should limit your intake of fat, especially saturated fat and trans fat.

Perhaps the most popular item on a fast-food menu is an order of French fries. Indeed, it is estimated that the average American eats 28 pounds of French fries per year. Unfortunately, French fries are very high in fat. A medium serving can have 18 grams of fat of which 5 grams are saturated fat and 4.5 grams are trans fat. Do you still want fries with that burger?

Onion rings are not much better. A medium serving can have 16 grams of fat of which 4 grams are saturated fat and 3.5 grams are trans fat. A better choice to accompany your meal is a baked potato which has no fat whatsoever.

Here is another helpful hint to reduce your intake of fat: If you like to eat toast with your breakfast, use jelly or jam

instead of butter.

Watch Sodium

The Recommended Daily Allowance (RDA) of sodium is 2,400 milligrams per day. This is the equivalent of about one teaspoon of table salt per day.

Fast food is notorious for being high in sodium. If you are not careful, you can easily get more than an entire day's worth of sodium in just one meal. An example of this is eating a ham-and-cheese omelet, two pancakes, sausage, bacon, hash browns and a biscuit for breakfast. Eat a cheeseburger, medium fries and a medium milk shake for lunch and a few slices of pizza for dinner and you have a great head start on establishing your very own salt mine (as well as clogging your arterial pipeline).

Most people know that French fries are high in sodium – a medium serving can have 640 milligrams. But a medium serving of onion rings can have 460 milligrams. How about a side order of chili? One serving can have more than 1,000 milligrams of sodium.

The fact of the matter is that sodium shows up in a number of unexpected places. For instance, a medium vanilla milk shake can have about 300 milligrams or more. Another unexpected surprise is that squirt of ketchup on your burger – a packet can have as much as 180 milligrams. And those seemingly harmless dill pickles check in at about 200 milligrams. Salad dressings can be loaded with sodium: Fat-free Italian dressing has a whopping 770 milligrams. Other foods that are high in sodium are cole slaw, potato salad, soups and chicken pot pie.

Think Green

Many fast-food restaurants now offer salads and some even have salad bars. However, just because it is salad does not automatically mean that it is healthy. You cannot go wrong with ingredients such as lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers and carrots. But you can sabotage an otherwise excellent choice of food with the dressing.

In general, salad dressings are almost all fat and quite high in sodium. So rather than drown your salad in dressing, order it on the side. Or better yet, use a fat-free or reduced-fat dressing. Remember, though, that using a reduced-fat dressing does not give you the license to pour it on ad libitum. Be aware, for example, that a packet

of reduced-fat creamy ranch dressing still has 100 calories of which 70 are from fat (along with 550 milligrams of sodium).

Something else to avoid on salads are croutons which are 30% fat or more and high in sodium. Also skip the bacon bits. And even though they are both salads, a garden salad is much healthier than a Caesar salad.

Limit Toppings/Sauces

A traditional topping for a sandwich is mayonnaise. Choosing to “hold the mayo” could save you 150 calories or more – and they are all from fat. If you need to put something on a sandwich, try using mustard instead of mayonnaise.

As noted earlier, a baked potato is a better choice than French fries or onion rings. But get it without butter, sour cream or other toppings/stuffings. Having a baked potato “stuffed” with bacon and cheese increases the calories from about 300 to 580, the fat calories from 0 to 200 and the milligrams of sodium from 25 to 950. Yikes!

Few foods are inextricably linked with toppings more than the ever-popular pizza. It is important to understand that a cheese pizza has more calories from fat than you might think. One medium slice of cheese pizza can have 240 calories of which 10 grams are from fat, including 5 grams of saturated fat (and 650 milligrams of sodium). And seriously, who eats just one slice? Add meat toppings and it only gets worse. Consider this: One medium slice of sausage pizza can have 340 calories of which 18 grams are from fat, including 8 grams of saturated fat (and 910 milligrams of sodium). All in one slice! So if you are going to get pizza, order it plain or with vegetable toppings.

Ketchup is a popular condiment but, again, it is high in sodium. Sauces, too, are usually high in sodium. Get tarter, barbecue and other sauces on the side. The same is true of gravy: If you want it with your mashed potatoes, order it on the side.

Go Grilled

A good rule of thumb when eating at fast-food restaurants – or anywhere else, actually – is to limit your intake of fried foods. Everything else being equal, grilled food is always healthier than fried (or breaded) food. Other healthier ways to prepare food are to have it baked, broiled, charbroiled, roasted or steamed. In addition to avoiding

foods that are fried or breaded, steer clear of foods that are dubbed "crispy."

Choose Poultry/Fish

Here is another good rule of thumb: Lighter meats are healthier than darker meats. So instead of ordering beef, choose chicken, turkey or fish. For breakfast, ham is a healthier choice than bacon or sausage.

As mentioned previously, the way that a food is prepared has an enormous impact on its nutritional content. Grilled chicken is a better choice than fried chicken. If the chicken you ordered has skin, remove it; the skin has plenty of calories and fat. Interestingly, some parts of a chicken are healthier than others. A drumstick, for instance, has much less calories and fat than a thigh.

Eat Fruit

Like vegetables, fruits are very low in calories and fat and packed with nutrients. In an effort to provide healthier choices, many fast-food restaurants have begun to offer choices of fruit. Hint: Apple pies, blueberry muffins, cherry turnovers and strawberry shakes are not charter members of the fruit group.

Besides a garden salad, you might be able to get a fruit salad. Another healthy option is yogurt.

Drink Responsibly

What do you drink at fast-food restau-

rants? Two things to avoid are milk shakes and sodas. Besides being high in sodium, milk shakes are high in calories and fat: A medium vanilla shake can have 41 grams of fat of which 27 grams are saturated fat. Gulp. A better choice is low-fat milk. Sodas are very high in sugar which has virtually no nutritional value. Couple that with free, unlimited, help-yourself refills and you have a recipe for dietary disaster. If you simply have to drink a soda, choose a diet version.

Of course, an excellent choice for a beverage is water which has no calories. Another good option for a beverage is some type of juice.

Get Substitutes

When you order your food, you have the right to ask for substitutes. Just because a value meal comes with a soda does not mean that you cannot ask for low-fat milk; just because a value meal comes with French fries does not mean that you cannot ask for a baked potato (plain, of course); just because the sandwich comes with a sesame-seed bun does not mean that you cannot ask for a whole-grain bread/roll. Remember, you can "have it your way."

Control Portions

Value meals sure sound tempting, right? But remember, the "value" is economical not nutritional. Yeah, you do get a lot of

food for your money but what you usually get is a lot of bad food for your money – more calories, more fat and more sodium. Some bargain.

One of the most important things that you can do when eating fast food is to exercise portion control. Get the smallest burger not the largest one (and get it minus cheese). Get the smallest order of fries not the largest one. In short, you would be very wise not to supersize. Also keep in mind that there are no standards for portion sizes. So a "small" size at one restaurant can be larger than a "small" size at another restaurant.

Share Food

Just because you sprung for a value meal, there is nothing that says that you have to eat it by yourself. You can save some money – and some calories – by getting a large-size value meal but then splitting it with a teammate.

Become Knowledgeable

A food at one restaurant can be dramatically different from the same food at another. For example, researchers from the Consumer Union – the non-profit publishers of Consumer Reports – compared the nutritional profiles of 36 chicken sandwiches from 16 fast-food chains. They found that a chicken sandwich at one fast-food restaurant had 360 calories of which 7 grams were from fat, including 2 grams of saturated fat. And a chicken sandwich at another fast-food restaurant had 950 calories of which 56 grams were from fat, including 10 grams of saturated fat. For that matter, a restaurant can offer different types of chicken sandwiches with vastly different nutrients.

You should become familiar with the menus and nutritional information of the fast-food restaurants at which you typically visit. At this point in time, all of the major fast-food chains have their own websites that contain very detailed information about the nutritional content of their foods. Sometimes, you can even find nutritional information conveniently posted right on the walls of restaurants.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The next time that you and your teammates pull into the parking lot of a fast-food restaurant, there is no need to panic. Instead, remember this: While the food may be fast, your choices need not.

Editor's Note: Matt Brzycki has authored, co-authored or edited 13 books on strength and fitness including: Wrestling Strength: The Competitive Edge, Wrestling Strength: Prepare to Win and Wrestling Strength: Dare to Excel. The three wrestling books are available at all major bookstores or through Cardinal Publishers Group (800-296-0481).



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