

7 Ways to Avoid Busting Your Diet When Dining Out

Going out for dinner tonight? It's a good bet that you'll eat more than if you had a home-cooked meal.

In fact, a new Tufts University survey of more than 360 menu items served by national chain and independent restaurants found that 9 in 10 are oversized meals, loaded with calories and unhealthy ingredients.

The Tufts researchers who conducted the survey, published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, called on restaurants to offer patrons the choice to reduce meal sizes for a lower price.

"These findings make it clear that making healthy choices while eating out is difficult because the combination of tempting options and excessive portions often overwhelm our self-control," said Susan B. Roberts, a nutrition and aging specialist at Tufts.

"Favorite meals often contain three or even four times the amount of calories a person needs, and although in theory we don't have to eat the whole lot, in practice most of us don't have enough willpower to stop eating when we have had enough."

The Tufts survey is only the latest research that suggests dining out is a key factor in the nation's ever-expanding waistline, with 1 in 3 Americans considered clinically obese and another third overweight, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

But you don't have to give up eating out to maintain a healthy diet; you just need to practice smart dining habits when having a meal in a fast-food or sit-down restaurant.

Here are seven ways to do exactly that, according to the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics:

Plan ahead. If you're planning to go out for lunch, just plan to have a light dinner that day. Or, if you know you're going to a restaurant for dinner, cut back on calories for breakfast and lunch.

Choose a varied-menu restaurant. Book reservations at a place with a wide range of menu items, including "heart-healthy" choices. It's also a good idea to check a restaurant menu online ahead of time for calorie information, so you know which items are less healthy (fried, sautéed or "crispy" meals) and those that are better options, such as steamed, broiled, baked or grilled foods.

Order balanced meals. Make sure to include healthy items from all the different food groups—whole grains, lean protein sources, vegetables and fruit. Salads and healthy side dishes with veggies are always a good idea, for instance. Baked or grilled chicken or fish are wise choices.

Ask about substitutions. Most restaurants will substitute healthier side items and accompaniments for health reasons. Replace fries with a side salad or steamed broccoli. Ask for olive oil and balsamic vinegar instead of high-calorie dressings. And go for fresh-fruit desserts, if you want an after-dinner sweet. Some restaurants will even make something that isn't on the menu—a kale salad or sautéed spinach, for instance—if those ingredients are in the kitchen. Don't be afraid to ask.

Control portions. Most restaurants serve oversized portions, but you don't have to clean your plate. Many entrées and dinner salads offer enough food for two people, so splitting dishes can cut calories and costs. Some appetizers are sufficient for a meal, when combined with a side salad. If you are ordering a full meal, ask for a take-out box to be

delivered to your table when your entree arrives and set aside half (or more) of it to take home.

Take your time. Eat your meal slowly to allow yourself to feel full, which can combat overeating. Slow eaters are less likely to overindulge than individuals who wolf down their meals in a rush. A recent study that people who were at an ideal weight chewed their food almost 40 times before swallowing, while those who were overweight chewed less than 10 times before swallowing.

Drink before eating. Studies show that people who drink a lot of water while dining eat less and lose more weight than people who don't. In fact, one study found people who drink a glass of water before each meal tend to eat less because water makes your stomach feel fuller, suppressing your hunger as well as your overall caloric intake.

"Oversize servings lead a lot of dieters to avoid most restaurants entirely, or stick to items like salads that they know are served in reasonable portions," said William Masters, professor of food economics who helped conduct the new Tufts restaurant survey.

"Standard meals are sized for the hungriest customers, so most people need superhuman self-control to avoid overeating. There is a gender dimension here that is really important: women typically have a lower caloric requirement than men, so on average need to eat less. Women, while dining out, typically have to be more vigilant."

Among the findings of the Tufts survey, which tracked 364 restaurant meals from large-chain and local restaurants in Boston, San Francisco and Little Rock:

- More than nine in 10 menu items (92 percent) exceeded recommended calorie requirements for a single meal.
- In 123 restaurants, a single meal serving—without beverages, appetizers or desserts—sometimes exceeded the

caloric requirements for an entire day.

- American, Chinese and Italian dishes had the highest calorie counts with a mean of 1,495 calories per meal.

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