



# 2018 4-H CONSUMER JUDGING

Foods and Nutrition

## CHOOSING FAST FOOD MEALS

Ali Berg, PhD, RDN, LD

Hannah Winston, BS, Hannah Wilson, BS,

Emily Selph, BSFCS

UGA Extension, Graduate Student Assistant

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Background Information

## **Fast Food Meals**

### **CONSUMER JUDGING 2018**

Although fast food was once defined by a drive-thru window and greasy burgers, fries, and shakes, there are now many styles of “fast food” that include walk-up counters and curbside pick-up. Since choices have greatly expanded in recent years, it can be hard to find a nutritious and economical choice. Fortunately, most fast food restaurants have increased their offerings of healthy foods due to consumer demand and public health concerns like obesity and nutrition-related chronic diseases (diabetes, high blood pressure, osteoporosis, etc). A little knowledge and the resources provided by fast food restaurants can equip you to make a smart decision. Because the nutrition information can be overwhelming, this study guide directs you to key points to consider.

Some meals can provide a convenient way to meet several of your MyPlate food groups. However, many fast food choices are high in sodium (salt), saturated fat, and *trans* fat, and low in the vitamins, minerals, and fiber that you need to grow and live a healthy and active lifestyle. Fast food meals are convenient and often cheap, so it can be tempting to choose the least expensive option. It is important to consider, though, that an item with more nutritional value may be worth the price. Consumers should compare prices, nutrients, and food groups within each meal. The following information will help you choose a healthy and affordable fast food meal to meet your specific needs.

#### Cost

The cost of fast food meals can depend on the restaurant and the ingredients in the meal. You can purchase single fast food items, such as a chicken sandwich alone, or a full meal, such as a chicken sandwich with a side and drink. A full meal may seem like a better value for your money. While budgeting is always important, many sides and drinks contain large amounts of saturated fat, sodium, and added sugars. Therefore, choosing healthier sides, even if they are slightly more expensive, is a good investment in your health. To help offset the additional cost of healthier sides, ask for a water cup instead of a soda. You can also simply choose the individual entrée to keep the price down and help you avoid the saturated fat, sodium, and added sugars in many sides and drinks.

For the consumer judging project, we will focus on the entrée and a side or just an entrée in the case of a salad. For all meals, we will assume you are drinking water or low-fat or fat free milk since these are the best beverage choices.

#### Nutritional Value

Meals are where we get most of our energy (calories) and nutrition (carbohydrates, protein, fats, vitamins and minerals). Think about trying to get the most nutrition for the calories you are taking in. You don't have to choose the option with the lowest calories. Pick the option where you get the most MyPlate Food Groups and nutrients your body needs (fiber, vitamins, and minerals) with less of the nutrients that are easy to get too much of (saturated and trans fat, sodium or salt, and sugar).

Almost all fast food restaurants have nutrition facts for their menu which are easily found on their website, or you can ask for the nutrition facts in person, which should be available for any restaurant that has at least 20 locations.

Remember, though, that fast food meals are not always the healthiest option. While they contain MyPlate food groups, they are often high in calories, salt, saturated, and/or *trans* fat, providing more than you should be having at each meal. Therefore, it is best to only have them sometimes and not every day.

### Ingredients

Fast food meals can have a very large list of ingredients because there are often several foods in one meal. Use the ingredient or food content list to identify the foods that belong to MyPlate food groups that are found in the meal, such as meat, grains, vegetables, fruits, nuts, etc.

Some other ingredients are used to keep foods fresh or safe or for flavoring. Try not to get too hung up on the number of ingredients, but rather look at the total contents of the meal to make sure you are getting the most nutrition that you can.

**MyPlate Food Groups:** When you are choosing a fast food meal, think about MyPlate, and try to choose a meal that will contain most if not all of the MyPlate food groups.

Fast food meals will almost always contain some type of grain, whether it is a bun for a hamburger or croutons in a salad. Remember, grains can provide carbohydrates, fiber, and B vitamins. We want to get at least half of our grains each day from whole grains, so a fast food meal that uses a whole wheat bun or whole wheat tortilla is a good choice. When reading the ingredient list, the grain at the top of the ingredient list should include the word “whole.” You may see enriched grains in the ingredient list, but those are not whole grains. Enriched grains have some of the vitamins and minerals that are removed through processing added back, but they are still not as healthy as whole grains. Enriched grains you might see in a fast food meal include flour tortillas, white hamburger or hot dog buns, or white rice. Some soups, salads, and sides at fast food restaurants now contain whole grains like brown rice, quinoa, or whole-grain pasta, so look for these when ordering!

Most fast food meals will have a protein food like beef, poultry, eggs, fish, or shellfish. Remember to look for items that are grilled instead of fried to reduce the saturated fat. Some fast food meals will contain beans which can count as a protein food or a vegetable. If you are eating beans at a meal and not eating meat, usually you count them as a protein food.

Many fast food restaurants are now offering fruit and vegetable options whether on sandwiches or as sides. Consider swapping the fries in your value meal for a fruit cup or veggie side to get more nutrients for fewer calories. Veggie-loaded entrees such as salads, vegetable soups, and vegetable stir fries are also great options packed with nutrients.

Choosing low-fat milk as your beverage or yogurt as a side or dessert are great ways to get your dairy foods. Many sandwiches or salads have cheese added, which is also a dairy food. However, it is important to consume cheese in moderation, as the types used are high in sodium and saturated fat.

## Calories: Carbohydrates, Fat, and Protein

**Calories:** Consider the calories in the portion size you plan to eat. While calories are not the only piece of nutrition information you should consider when choosing a meal, they can help guide you in making the best choice.

- When having a fast food meal, one meal should provide approximately 400 - 800 calories, depending on the person's age, gender, body size, activity level, and health needs. Don't forget, this includes all dressings, dips, sides, and any extras like toppings on a salad or crackers added to a soup. If the meal is less than 400 calories, consider adding a food from a MyPlate group that is missing, like a piece of fruit or a glass of milk.

Usually meals have more than one component to them, such as an entrée and a side, so if the calories seem very high, try replacing the side (which is usually fries on the menu) with a side of fruit or a side salad.

**Carbohydrates:** Under normal, healthy conditions, carbohydrates are our bodies' primary source of energy. It's important to get carbohydrates from your food, but some sources of carbohydrates (like whole grains) provide more nutrients than others. Look on the nutrition label to see how much total carbohydrate, sugar, and fiber a fast food meal contains.

**Fiber:** Carbohydrates from fiber are beneficial to your health by causing you to feel full for longer and helping with digestion. Eating enough fiber can also reduce your risk for heart disease and some cancers. Look for fast food meals with more fiber.

**Sugars:** Sugar is a carbohydrate that is present in naturally sweet foods like fruits and dairy products but can be added to foods as well to increase the sweetness. Natural sugar found in foods like fresh fruit and low-fat dairy are a good choice, because they provide energy from the natural sugar and bring vitamins, minerals, and/or fiber along with it. However, sugar that is added to a food to sweeten it provides energy with few or no nutrients and no dietary fiber. Added sugar can be found in foods like dried fruit, flavored milk or yogurts, granola, and salad dressings. On the nutrition facts label, sugars are listed under carbohydrates. You can find out if a product has sugar added by looking at the ingredient list for sugar or other names such as dextrose, fructose, brown rice syrup, cane syrup, corn syrup, and cane juice. Although some of these might sound healthier, like honey or brown rice syrup, they are all basically the same to your body— sources of added sugar that we want to limit in the foods we eat.



## Fat

Our bodies need fat to provide energy and carry nutrients, but not too much. Some types of fat are better for our health than others. Saturated fat and *trans* fat are bad for your heart health. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) recommends that you limit saturated fat to less than 10% of calories and avoid *trans* fat. Look for fast food meals that are lower in saturated fat and contain 0

grams *trans* fat. If you look at the ingredient list, you do NOT want to find “partially hydrogenated oils” listed, as these are sources of *trans* fat.

Fried foods, which are a popular choice in fast food restaurants, are often high in saturated fats. Choosing grilled, baked, or broiled options often is an easy way to reduce the saturated fat in a fast food meal. Salad dressings, dips, and other condiments can also be high in saturated fat. One option to reduce saturated fat is to ask for these dressings on the side of your items and not mixed in. This way you can control how much you consume and limit the added fats that might be found in the dressing. Other ways to reduce fat include leaving off the additional toppings provided in salads, like bacon, tortilla strips, shredded cheese, and sugar-glazed nuts.

## **Protein**

Protein does so many things in your body, but it is best known for helping you build muscle. Protein also helps you feel full for longer. In any meal, it is best to try to get some protein because it keeps you full and it ensures you get enough protein throughout the day. A lot of times, the protein is fried in a fast food meal, so choosing a grilled, seared, or baked option is healthiest.

## **Vitamins and Minerals**

Vitamins and minerals are listed on nutrition labels as a percent daily value (%DV). The goal is to get 100% of the DV of each nutrient from foods each day. While these values are easy to find on packaged foods that you buy at the grocery store, the nutrition labels of fast food items often do not list information on vitamins and minerals (like calcium, iron, and vitamin C). This doesn’t mean your fast food meal doesn’t have those nutrients; it just means they are not listed. So, unless the certain vitamins and minerals you are looking for can be found on the nutrition facts of all the meals you are deciding between, it is best to make your decision based on the MyPlate food groups and nutrients that are listed on all choices (like calories, sodium, protein, and fiber).

## **Salt**

Our bodies need sodium (salt) to function, but getting too much leads to high blood pressure and is harmful to your health. The 2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and MyPlate recommend that you consume no more than 2,300 milligrams (mg) of sodium per day. Be sure to check the nutrition facts and choose meals that are lower in sodium. This might be difficult to do because many restaurants add salt to their food for flavoring and to help preserve foods. You will probably notice that most fast food meals have about half of the total sodium you should have in a day. This is why it is important to eat fast food less often. Still, being mindful and making any possible changes to reduce the sodium in the meal or choose lower sodium items can make a big difference.

### CHECK YOUR KNOWLEDGE (answers on the next page)

1. Which protein will likely have less fat?  
a. Grilled chicken      b. Fried chicken
2. If you order a salad at a fast food restaurant, what special request can you make to limit the amount of fats you consume?  
a. Leave off the dried fruit  
b. Ask for the dressing on the side
3. Which fast food meal is the best choice in regard to sodium?  
a. Meal A = 800 mg      b. Meal B = 1500 mg
4. Which nutrient helps us feel full, aids in digestion, and is found in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains?  
a. iron      b. fiber
5. Which side should you choose to get more food groups from your combo meal if the entrée is a burger with lettuce, tomato, and cheese?  
a. French fries      b. Fruit cup      c. Baked potato
6. True or False: A cheaper meal is always going to be a healthier choice than a more expensive one.  
a. True      b. False

### References

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### Check Your Knowledge Answers

1. a
2. b
3. a
4. b
5. b
6. b – remember, not all cheap meals are healthy, and neither are all expensive meals!