

Diabetes: Eating Out

Having diabetes should not keep you from eating at your favorite restaurant or eating out when you travel. However, you do need to plan ahead. Following your plan helps control your blood sugar as well as your weight. Your meal plan is a guide for what you eat, when you eat, and how much you should eat to keep your blood sugar at a healthy level. It is based on:

- How many calories you need each day
- A balance of carbohydrates (starches, fruit, milk)
- Eating less saturated fat, trans fats, and salt.
- The medicines you take
- Your activity level

A dietitian or diabetes health educator can help you make a meal plan. When you are away from home, try to eat at the same times you do when you are home and to eat the same amounts and types of food.

How do I stay on my meal plan when I eat out?

Many restaurants offer foods that are lower in fat, cholesterol, and salt, and higher in fiber. Healthy food choices include salads, whole-grain breads, baked, grilled or broiled foods, steamed vegetables, sugar and salt substitutes, and diet drinks.

When you eat out:

- Pick a restaurant with many food choices.
- Be flexible with your plan. If you want more noodles, then have less bread. If you want a dessert, order a meal such as grilled fish with steamed vegetables that doesn't contain a starch.
- Don't eat large servings. You don't have to finish everything on your plate. Most restaurants offer "to-go" boxes.
- If you count carbohydrate food choices with each meal at home, try to eat the same amount when you eat out. Here are examples of different kinds of food choices:
 - **Italian.** Choose minestrone soup, chicken or veal piccata, pasta with marinara sauce and grilled chicken, fish or vegetables. One cup of pasta has about 45 grams of carbs. Limit or avoid lasagna and risotto, which are high in carbs. Also limit high-fat cheese and meats.
 - **Mexican.** Choose soft tacos with chicken or fish and salsa, shrimp or chicken fajitas, or a taco salad. Limit or avoid tortillas, rice, and beans, which are high in carbs. Also limit sour cream, cheese and chimichangas, which are high in calories.
 - **Chinese.** Choose wonton soup, chicken or beef chop suey, stir-fried chicken or shrimp with vegetables, or chicken chow mein. Limit or avoid servings of fried rice, egg rolls, breaded and fried chicken, and sauces with sugar, like sweet and sour sauce.

- Ask that the bread or chips not be placed on the table until the food is served. It is too easy to overeat these foods while waiting for your meal. Have broth or salad before the meal instead.
- Ask that sauces and salad dressings be served on the side so that you can control how much you put on your food. Or you can try dipping your fork in the sauce or dressing before picking up the food. Avoid sauces that are high in fat.
- Order steamed nonstarchy vegetables such as broccoli or green beans.
- Have fruit, or low-fat or fat-free yogurt, for dessert.
- Eat slowly.
- Follow your healthcare provider's recommendation about the use of alcohol.

Is it OK to eat at fast food restaurants?

Many fast food restaurants offer smaller portions, grilled chicken selections, meals with a choice of fruit and milk instead of fries and soda, and creative salads with bottled waters. Here are some tips for ordering healthier fast foods:

- Order the smaller portion sizes. Avoid menu items that include deluxe, super sized, or jumbo in their name.
- Pick low-fat or skim milk or water instead of a soft drink.
- Choose grilled chicken items rather than fried foods.
- Ask for mustard and ketchup instead of mayonnaise.
- Ask for low-fat or fat-free salad dressing.
- Skip the fries, croissants, and biscuits. They are high in carbs and fat. Fat-free muffins are also high in sugar and calories.

Where can I find nutrition information?

Most restaurants have nutrition information for all menu items. They tell you the total calories, grams of carbohydrate, protein, fat, and sodium. You can ask for this information at the restaurant or check the restaurant's Web site.

Although restaurants may offer healthy choices, many restaurant foods are still high in salt. To keep a balance on days you eat out, make sure the meals you eat at home are low in salt.

Are there other tips for when I travel?

When traveling by plane, boat, or train, request diabetic meals a day or two before you leave. Travel agents can help with this. Always keep a carry-on bag with you. The bag should have your diabetic medicines and supplies and also some snacks. If a meal is late, eat a snack from your bag. Snacks that travel well are fresh fruits, dried fruit, cheese and crackers, peanut butter, and snack bars. Be sure to replace the snacks you eat so you never run out.

When you are changing time zones, ask your healthcare provider what changes you need to make and when to take your medicine.

For more information, contact

- The American Diabetes Association
800-342-2383
<http://www.diabetes.org>

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