

Chow Line

News from the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences

Dining out? Put focus on friends over food

Now that spring is here, I seem to be going out for dinner with friends a lot more often. I have already gained five pounds. Besides choosing a salad as my main dish, what else can I do to be sure I don't overeat when eating out?

First, don't assume that all salads are necessarily lower in calories than other choices on the menu. A quick Internet search of nutrition information for one restaurant chain showed its entree-sized salads ranged from 440 calories for a salad featuring seared tuna to 1,510 calories for a Caesar salad with chicken.

Unfortunately, it's often not easy to determine what would be the healthiest option or figure out what items have a reasonable number of calories. Rules requiring restaurant chains to include nutrition information on menus, in the works since 2010, have been delayed until next year at the earliest. And even then, they won't cover independently owned restaurants and smaller chains.

There's also a psychological hurdle: When you join with friends to enjoy a meal together, it's easy to switch into "special occasion" mode and treat yourself to items you wouldn't necessarily choose every day. But if you're eating out more often, you need to be careful not to indulge every time.

Here are some tips from the Association of Nutrition and Dietetics (eatright.org) and the National Institutes of Health (medlineplus.gov):

- Prepare ahead. If you know you'll be eating out later, have a small, healthy breakfast and lunch, and a light snack — such as an orange, a small apple or a handful of baby carrots, and a full glass of water — before you leave for the restaurant. And if you know where you'll be dining, check the restaurant's website to see if



photo: Stockbyte

you can find nutrition information ahead of time.

- Watch portion sizes. Dietitians have long advised clients who are trying to lose weight to eat only half of what is served to them and take the other half home for another meal. Now, some say that even half of the oversized portions served at many restaurants might be too much. When you get your food, visualize what a sensible serving size would be, and eat only that much.
- Look on the menu for items for seniors, which are often smaller portions, or those designated as healthful choices. Don't overlook those options thinking they're not for you.
- Include a simple side salad with an oil-based or light dressing. Avoid creamy dressings. Ask for dressing on the side, and don't use all of it.
- Choose foods that indicate they are broiled, grilled, steamed, poached, roasted or baked, which tend to have fewer calories. Words that indicate an item has more calories include breaded, fried, buttered, battered, crispy, creamy and au gratin.
- Watch the alcohol, which adds calories and may increase your appetite and lower your resolve to eat healthfully.
- Finally, enjoy yourself, knowing you are mindfully making the right choices while savoring the company of good friends.

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Editor: This column was reviewed by Irene Hatsu, food security specialist with Ohio State University Extension.

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