

Chow Line

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

Eating out? Help kids make healthful choices

We seem to be eating out more and more. Instead of just ordering for them, I want to teach my children (ages 9 and 11) how to make healthier choices, whether we're at a sit-down restaurant or going through a drive-thru. Any tips?

You're right to be concerned. A few years ago, the U.S. Department of Agriculture published a study, "How Food Away from Home Affects Children's Diet Quality." It found that for children ages 6-18, each meal eaten out contributed an extra 65 calories and lowered diet quality by 4 percent, as measured by an index based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, compared with meals prepared at home. About a third of the higher number calories were due to soft drinks and other sweetened beverages. For older children, the number of extra calories consumed per meal jumped to 107.

While eating extra calories every once in a while might not be so bad, doing so regularly is a sure path to becoming overweight or obese.

Eating home-prepared meals as a family (with family members engaged with each other — the television turned off) has its benefits. Studies indicate that children and teens in these families tend not only to have healthier diets and less risk of obesity, but better emotional well-being as well. Given that evidence, see if you can find ways to plan ahead so you can eat in more often than not.

But sometimes eating out is the only option. Here are some tips from the Nemours Foundation (kidshealth.org) and the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (www.eatright.org):

- Avoid fried and breaded foods, even fried fish, chicken and vegetables. Instead, let your



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children choose among healthier options, such as grilled chicken or a deli turkey sandwich on whole-grain bread.

- If french fries or potato chips come with a meal, ask about healthier sides.
- When available, choose a whole-grain option for bread or pasta. (Note that "multi-grain" doesn't offer the same benefits as whole grains.)
- Encourage healthier drink options, such as water or low-fat milk. Besides reducing sugar intake, they can help your children avoid the caffeine prevalent in many beverages. Keep in mind that flavored milk usually has a lot of added calories.
- Watch portion sizes. Tell your children explicitly that they don't have to eat everything on their plate. If sandwiches or other items are large, ask for them to be cut in half so your children can split them.

The restaurants you choose to go to also can have a big impact. Find ones with healthier options that are prominent on the menu. A study published earlier this year in the journal *Obesity* showed that when a family restaurant chain in the eastern U.S. changed its children's meals to include fruit or vegetables as the default instead of fries, relatively few customers asked for fries on the side and the healthfulness of the meals sold skyrocketed. Having healthy food options as the norm on menus makes a difference when eating out.

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