

Overview

In today's hectic lifestyle, three out of every four meals that we eat away from home are fast food meals. One might think that fast foods are forbidden for someone with diabetes, but with a little information and common sense, fast foods can be eaten and still allow staying within a healthy meal plan.

Where Do You Begin?

When eating out you need to know the nutritional value of what you are ordering and try to stay as close as you can to your routine meal plan. Unfortunately, most fast food meals are higher in fat and calories than what you cook at home, so it's important to know which are the best choices. Persons with all types of diabetes, who eat out on a regular basis, need to consider the fat content of fast foods. Diabetes research continues to point to the value of limiting fat in the diet as a means to lowering risks for heart attacks and strokes.

For persons where weight management is a concern, occasionally it is okay to move some of your fat allowance around in your meal. One goal is to try to have no more than one-half of your daily fat exchanges or fat grams in your fast food meal. Then, plan to eat lower fat meals for the rest of the day.

The carbohydrate content of meals is a major concern since carbohydrates have the quickest affect on your blood glucose. In general, a regular size hamburger bun will count the same as two slices of bread or as two carbohydrate choices. A small order of french fries will count as two carbohydrate choices (and also two fat choices). To keep from overeating, stay away from the "biggie" or "super-size" portions of fast foods. Many fast food restaurants provide the nutritional content of their foods. Ask for a copy. This can be a helpful tool for planning a "fast food" meal.

How can you include "fast food" beef in your meal plan?

It is best to choose a regular size hamburger (which is about 2 ounces of meat) or a quarter pounder (which has 3 ounces of meat). Skip the high fat extras like cheese, mayonnaise, bacon and special sauce. A side salad and/or a small order of fries would probably fit into your meal plan. Get extra tomatoes, lettuce, and pickles to add flavor. Sandwiches that have an extra bun (like the Big Mac) or an extra large bun will add extra carbohydrates which may make your blood sugar go up more than you expect. Some fast-food restaurants offer roast beef sandwiches. If you order the regular-sized version, and top it with lettuce, tomato and onion (and avoid mayonnaise-based sauces), this can be a very low-fat choice

What about "fast food" chicken and fish choices?

To keep the meal as low fat as possible, don't order chicken or fish sandwiches or entrees that are breaded, battered or deep-fried. Many fast food restaurants offer grilled chicken sandwiches. If you ask them to leave off the sauce, you'll have a good, low fat choice. If available, opt for rotisserie chicken (remove the skin) or baked fish (with cocktail sauce rather than tartar sauce). If fried chicken is your only choice, be sure to take off the skin. Remember that "extra crispy" usually means extra fat!

What about pizza?

Pizza has been shown to raise blood glucose more than other fast foods. However, pizza can be a healthy food if you practice portion control and a little common sense when ordering. Choose thin crust rather than thick, and you may save up to 130 calories per slice. This will also help to keep the carbohydrate in your meal at a reasonable level. Avoid adding higher fat items such as pepperoni or sausage. Then, ask for less cheese and extra mushrooms, onions, tomatoes and green peppers. Finally, limit yourself to the number of slices called for in your meal plan and order a side salad if you are still hungry.

How can you manage other fast food alternatives?

Some fast food restaurants offer alternatives to the burger and fries routine. A baked potato can be a filling and nutritious meal but because of its large size counts as five carbohydrate choices. It is best not to have cheese sauce, bacon, butter or sour cream, as these add extra fat. Instead, go to the salad bar and top your potato with chunks of grilled chicken or ham, cottage cheese, salsa, and/or steamed broccoli (or any other vegetable). Chili, offered at Wendy's, is a surprisingly good choice. A small chili counts as 2 ounces of meat and one carbohydrate choice. Prepared salads and salad bars are another fast food option. You can feel free to load up on the vegetables. Salads (such as potato salad and macaroni salad) can fit into the diet, but are often too high in fat for most meal plans.

Important Things to Remember

- In general, good fast food choices are: chili, roast beef sandwiches, small hamburgers, grilled chicken sandwiches, salads and baked potatoes with low fat toppings.
- Avoid the temptation to order "deluxe," "jumbo," or "super size" even though they may be advertised as better bargains. These are generally extra large portions that you don't need.
- Eat your fast food meal at about the same time as you normally eat.

How Can Your Doctor Help You?

If you need help with your meal plan or you are not certain that your diet is a good one, your doctor may have helpful information and can refer you to a dietitian or diabetes educator. Also, your doctor will let you know of any special dietary needs that you have, such as a low fat/low cholesterol diet to control your blood cholesterol level, or a low sodium diet to help control blood pressure.

To purchase a fast food dining guide visit www.fastfoodfacts.com

Quiz

1. Most fast food meals are higher in _____ and calories than those cooked at home.
2. True or False: The carbohydrate content of meals is a concern because it has the quickest effect on your blood glucose.
3. If you have a hamburger or chicken sandwich, which topping should you avoid to cut back on fat?
 - a) Lettuce
 - b) Mustard
 - c) Mayonnaise
 - d) Pickles

Answers: 1) fat, 2) True, 3) c