

# Making healthier choices in fast food

By **Melissa Brackley**

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Most of us have been told that fast food is not a healthy choice, and yet, so many of us get in a hurry and grab a bag of the nearest fast food to appease our hunger and get on our way.

We live in a fast-paced society, and people will probably always need food fast, but are there healthier options at McDonald's and Burger King that might support our fast-food lifestyle while supporting a healthy body?

Carolyn Benepe, director of community nutrition at the Sheridan Senior Citizens Center, said it is hard as a nutritionist to recommend any fast food as a healthy option, but there are lesser evils.

Benepe said the biggest caution one can take is to watch for appropriate portions.

"We used to call it portion control," she said. "Now I call it portion out of control."

She said that the average meal dining out is way bigger than we need, and yet we still eat the entire plate.

"A small size is still large," she said. "But a small hamburger and a small fry with milk is a better choice."

But portions aren't the only issue.

"The problem with fast food is that it is high in calories but low in nutrients," she said. "There are hardly any fruits, veggies, milk, or whole grains."

But she said grilled or deli sandwiches are often more nutritious than fried varieties, and she recommended, "Put your salad in your sandwich."

By adding as many vegetables to sandwiches as possible or even adding meat to a vegetarian sandwich, people can get more of the nutrients they need.

Benepe said that eating salads and vegetables or ordering juice or milk instead of soda can increase your nutrient intake, so instead of always reaching

for the burger and fries, try a soup and salad.

She added that a quick trip to the grocery store can be just as fast as a drive-through, and picking up fruit, vegetables, yogurt, hummus, or cheese can be an instantly healthier choice. Or even head to the supermarket deli for salads and fresh sandwiches.

She said another strategy for healthy eating on the go is, "Think your drink."

According to Benepe, soda contains the emptiest calories, which don't help the body in any way.

"We down hundreds of calories in soda and then still eat just as much," she said.

So choosing water, milk, or juice can make any meal healthier.

But fast food is still highly caloric (sometimes one meal is the equivalent of an entire day's worth of calories), and just because it's a healthier option doesn't mean

a salad or grill has fewer calories.

"People must be aware that sometimes a salad can have the same number of calories as a Whopper," she said, referring to Burger King's mainstay hamburger. "Bacon, fried chicken pieces, and salad dressing can add a considerable amount of calories and fat."

Take the taco salad at Taco Bell for example. According to the Taco Bell Web site, the salad has 850 calories and 52 grams of fat. That's 520 more calories than a chicken Gordita Supreme, so just because it is called a salad doesn't mean it's the best option.

And the same goes for fresh sandwiches. The Subway Web site lists many 6-inch subs in the 200-300 calorie range, but not all sandwiches at Subway are as healthy.

A 6-inch Italian BMT has 530 calories and 31 grams of fat, and a classic 6-inch meatball sub has 501 calories and 25 grams of fat. These are about the equivalent of a McDonald's Big Mac at 540 calories and 29 grams of fat.



**Carolyn Benepe**

Director of Community Nutrition, Senior Center



The Sheridan Press/Michael Sullivan

Burger King Manager Dena Sayer takes the food order of Tim and Sharon Richmond of Columbia, La., who were traveling through Sheridan on vacation Thursday afternoon.

Another fact to consider is that apparently healthier options, such as baked potatoes instead of fries, may not really be healthier.

According to the Arby's Web site, a baked potato with butter and sour cream has 100 more calories and 4 more grams of fat than a medium fry at 400 calories and 20 grams of fat. That's 500 calories and 24 grams of fat for a baked potato.

But healthier options are out there.

Their respective Web sites state that McDonald's and Wendy's offer a variety of garden salads between 200 and 350 calories, and Burger King and Dairy Queen both offer grilled chicken sandwiches for under 320 calories.

Even Taco Bell and Taco John's have soft shell tacos and crunchy tacos between 190 and 300 calories.

The nutrition facts are available online, so people don't have to be ignorant about what fast food can do to their bodies.

But aside from calories and nutrients, Benepe said the way people eat needs to change.

"We need to slow down enough to eat it," she said. "Sometimes we order at the drive-through and eat while we're driving, and we look down at the empty wrapper and hardly remember what we ate."

She added: "We're not present and we're not nourishing ourselves with that food. If you have fast food, try to slow down when you eat it."

Benepe said the best option is to take time to cook at home, but given our lifestyles, this may be unrealistic.

However, by moderating consumption of fast food and choosing healthier options, we can try to balance our caloric and nutrient intake with our body's needs.

"The quality of the food we eat often coincides with the quality of our health," she said.