

Useful tips can help you dine out sensibly

Written by meg sibal, m.d.

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ALTHOUGH it's easy to get derailed from your healthy diet when eating in a restaurant or in celebrating the fast-approaching holidays, a little preparation can minimize the damage, says the November 2014 issue of the Weill Cornell Medical College *Women's Nutrition Connection*.

Pegah Jalali, MS, RD, a clinical dietitian at New York-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell suggests these steps you can take to stay on track when dining out:

¶ Be prepared - "Before going out to eat, look up the nutrition facts, including calories, fat, sodium and portion size, and then make smart decisions," advises Jalali.

(Chain restaurants are required to post nutrition information available online, as well as in the restaurants.)

¶ Share an entree with another diner - Meal portions in most restaurants are two, three or more times the amount of food you need.

"If no one wants to share, or you're dining alone, ask for a to-go container with your entree, and box up half of it when it is served," says Jalali.

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Choosing an appetizer for your main meal is another option - most appetizers provide a meal's worth of food, if not more.

¶ Increase vegetables, decrease starches - Substitute vegetables for starchy sides, such as fries, a baked potato, rice or pasta with, and start your meal with a simple green salad.

However, if you do get a baked potato or other high-starch side, move half of it to a side plate when you are served.

¶ Avoid food that is fried or prepared with added butter - words that can tip you off include breaded, buttered, creamed, escaloped, butter sauce, pan-fried and sauteed.

¶ Control your sodium - According to Jalali, a) The simplest dishes are most likely to be the lowest in salt; examples include grilled chicken breast (no sauce) or grilled fish with lemon;

b) Also, avoid bread or anything with a broth - bread products contribute the most sodium to the average American diet; and

c) Gravies, sauces and anything prepared with broth is high in sodium.

When you order, ask that no extra salt be added to your meal during preparation.

¶ Skip dessert unless it is a special occasion - If you are celebrating, then share a dessert with your dining companion.

“Dessert is meant to be for taste and not for nutrition provision, so take small bites and savor

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each mouthful," says Jalali.

¶ Make tradeoffs - Before you order, decide what your entire meal will include - if you won't find the meal satisfying without a glass of wine or some of that special bread, then decide that dessert is off-limits.

On the other hand, if you're salivating for a few bites of that decadent dessert, skip the bread and wine, and drink water.

¶ Bypass the bread basket - Either ask your server to hold the bread altogether, or move the bread out of your reach and limit yourself to one piece.

¶ Skip soft drinks and other high-calorie beverages - A couple of glasses of regular soda will add 200 or more calories to your meal, with no beneficial nutrients, cautions the health letter.

¶ Make healthy requests - Many individuals have dietary restrictions or preferences - and a good restaurant will be happy to accommodate reasonable requests - such as, putting dressings or sauces on the side or minimizing the fat and sodium added during cooking.

If you do overindulge (caution: do not make a habit of it) despite your best of intentions, don't be too hard on yourself - just identify the less healthy choices you made and resolve to make healthier choices the next time you dine out, the health letter concludes.