



Pay attention when dining out

When I go to lunch with co-workers, I push to eat at “healthier” fast food places, but my friends say they’re not really any better. Is that true?

Well, it’s true that some restaurants offer more healthful options than others. But most dietitians will tell you it’s possible to choose lower-calorie, more-healthful meals almost anywhere, just as it’s possible to choose higher-calorie, less-healthful meals at the “healthy” places. In fact, if you’re not paying attention, you might be fooling yourself about calorie consumption at restaurants with a reputation for their healthful options.

A study in the October 2007 issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research* examined just this phenomenon. The researchers approached consumers who had just finished eating a meal consisting of a sandwich, side order and soft drink at two separate restaurants — McDonald’s and Subway — and asked them to estimate the calories. Consistently, customers at Subway, marketed as a more healthful option than other fast-food restaurants, tended to underestimate their calorie intake to a much greater extent than McDonald’s customers.

For example, for a meal averaging just over 900 calories, McDonald’s customers estimated they had consumed 764 calories, while Subway customers estimated 559 calories. Larger meals had an even greater effect: For meals averaging 1,327 calories, McDonald’s customers estimated they had eaten

843 calories, while Subway customers estimated calories at just 646.

The researchers said much of the problem resulted because Subway customers tended to purchase larger drinks and higher-calorie sides than the McDonald’s customers. The researchers call this the “health halo” effect — when people believe they’ve made a healthful choice for a main dish, they reward their good behavior with an indulgence.

The fact is, most people have extreme difficulty estimating calories in food. If you do want to keep track:

- Keep a food diary. Write down everything you eat over the day. Measure and weigh foods that aren’t pre-packaged.
- List each food’s calories. Use Nutrition Facts labels, calorie-counting books or Web sites such as <http://www.nutritiondata.com/> or <http://www.calorie-count.com/>. Restaurants also often have nutrition information.
- Tally up the calories. The total may surprise you.

You can find how many calories you should be eating at <http://mypyramid.com> — click on “MyPyramid Plan.” To cut back, identify the highest-calorie foods you eat and substitute lower-calorie options. Say “no” to cheese and spreads on your sandwich. And, choose water, milk or diet soft drinks instead of sugary sodas.

Chow Line is a service of Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Chow Line, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH, 43210-1044, or filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu.



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