

The Daily Union

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Title: Eat Smart Away from Home

Americans are eating out more than ever. Ninety percent of consumers say they enjoy going to restaurants. According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2015), Americans on average spend about 43 percent of their total food budget on food prepared away from home and eat more than a third of their calories from restaurants, takeout, or other non-home prepared foods. The highest income earners spend 49 percent of their food budget on food prepared away from home. Food is available almost any time and anywhere today, encouraging consumers to eat more food and to eat more frequently.

Millennials (those born between 1981 and 2003) have surpassed the Baby Boomer generation and are now the largest living generation. Millennials currently make up over one fourth of the nation's population and they like to eat out a lot. Food preference and consumption surveys indicate that millennials are spending more of their food dollars on foods away from home (FAFH). Millennials spend 44 percent of their food dollars (\$2,921 annually) on eating out compared to the baby boomers, who spend 40 percent of their food dollars eating out. The Millennials consume food in a restaurant or bar around 30 percent more often than any other generation.

More than 70 percent of Americans 20 years and older are overweight or obese, according to statistics available through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Obesity raises the risk of preventable, life-threatening illnesses — including heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and certain types of cancer — and is responsible for billions of dollars in annual health-care costs. Weight and obesity problems are in part due to the increasing frequency of foods consumed away from home. In general, consuming foods away from home (FAFH) tends to increase total calories, total fat, saturated fat, sodium, and sugar in a person's diet.

Holiday eating habits can, and often do, contribute to these statistics. Consider what your holiday schedule looks like. With more activities, you have less time to prepare your healthy options and perhaps opt for the drive-thru fast food option more often.

But wait! The American Heart Association's Eat Smart Month campaign promotes alternative strategies that can keep you in check with your goal for healthy eating. Read on to find out what they recommend for you as part of their promotion of this initiative.

"You don't have to drop your healthy habits when eating away from home. Many restaurants, workplaces and school cafeterias now offer better-for-you options and menus. But it may still take a little bit of effort and a splash of willpower to construct a healthy meal away from home. Here are some tips to help.

- Do some research. Look up menus and nutrition info online to find healthier options. Ask servers or managers about ingredients, preparation methods and substitutions.
- Look for clues. The menu may have "healthy" designations or symbols, or key words in item names (like light, fresh, fit, vegetarian), which indicate they could be a better choice.
- Add color. Look for fruits and vegetables on the menu that you can add as sides or substitutes in your meal.
- Avoid the fryer. Deep-fried foods tend to be less healthy than other options, like grilled, roasted, steamed and baked.
- Keep it on the side. Request that butter, cheese, toppings, salad dressings, sauces and gravies be served on the side so you control how much you eat.
- Stick with water. Stay away from sugary soft drinks, sweet tea and cocktails. They're loaded with added sugars and extra calories you don't need.
- Split it. If the portions are large, share something or set aside half to take home before you start eating. Turn one oversized portion into two meals.
- Bring it from home. Pack your own healthy meals and snacks so you can resist the temptations on the cafeteria line or in the vending machine."

Source: <https://www.heart.org>. Look for the Eat Smart month tab!

No doubt, you want to enjoy the season with fun, friends, and all the festivities. If you find yourself eating away from home more often, you can continue to enjoy eating tasty and nutritious food that will keep you heart healthy throughout the year.

For more information on making healthy food choices for you and your family, contact me at the Geary County K-State Research & Extension office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!