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# Setting an Example When Eating Out as a Family

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Eating together as a family does not mean you always have to cook a meal or always eat at home. With all the activities children are in, it can be hard to find the time, or maybe you don't like to cook. What can you do? Eating out together as a family in a restaurant or buying take-out food to take home, to athletic events, on a picnic, or to a family gatherings can be an option. Eating together is half of the equation, but you also need to make sure that you and your children are getting all of the nutrients you need.

Because most restaurants do not provide nutritional information about their menu items, making healthy food selections can be a challenge. However, restaurant meals can be healthy if each family member selects low-fat, low-sugar, low-salt choices based on the recommendations of MyPyramid. Calories and amounts to eat from the different food groups vary according to your age, sex, and activity level. Use the web site <http://www.mypyramid.gov> to determine your children's and your recommended amounts for each food group. For example, recommendations for a 2,000 calorie daily eating plan include: 6 ounce equivalents of grain foods (half of whole grains), 2½ cups of vegetables, 2 cups of fruits, 5½ ounces of lean meats and beans, and 3 cups of milk.

## Helping Your Child Select Healthy Choices

The choices you make as a parent will influence your children's choices. If you choose and enjoy eating healthy foods, your children are more likely to choose healthy foods, too. Results from several studies over the past decade show that children follow their parents' eating patterns, so parents really do strongly influence their children's food preferences and choices. The bottom line really is this: If you eat healthy foods, your children will also eat healthy.

Besides modeling healthy eating, talk with your children about MyPyramid and all of the delicious foods they can eat that will help keep them healthy. Explain that you make healthy choices when you shop for food at the grocery store, so when you eat out, you need to make healthy choices, too. Establish some family guidelines that everyone (including you, the parent) will follow when eating out, such as, "We will have low-fat milk and/or water with our meal." If you have young children, explain that you will choose two or three healthy foods and then they can decide what they want from those choices.

In your family guidelines you may decide that every fifth time you eat out, anyone can order whatever they want (within reason) and not restrict choices. This allows for the enjoyment of all foods occasionally, so your family members will not feel they are missing out on foods they enjoy, see on television, or see their friends eating.

To help make eating out fun, as well as help your children make healthy choices, play a game by asking questions such as, “What can you order from the menu that is green and leafy?” “What can you put on your sandwich that is red and round?” “What can you drink that is white?” Another game could be to see who can eat the most colorful meal. With older children you could explore the language of menus, food terms, and foreign food items.

### Serving Size

Serving size is not typically a problem with children, as they will usually stop eating when they are full. However, teens and adults are tempted by serving sizes that may be two or three times a normal portion size. That’s why it is important to be familiar with MyPyramid and know what constitutes a normal portion size. In most instances, you can skip the supersize and other larger size meals or entrees. The extra calories they provide will most likely just go to waste—your waist. If the meal arrives and you see that is very large, cut your serving in two and put half in a “doggy bag” and save it for lunch the next day. If you have a favorite restaurant and know that the servings are very large, you might also consider sharing one entrée and one dessert with another family member.

### Try Healthy Choices

Following the MyPyramid recommendations to meet your daily nutritional needs can be a little easier if you choose low-fat, low-sugar, low-salt foods from the chart below:

Food group	Choose these often:	Occasionally eat:
Bread/grains	Whole grain or multi-grain buns, bread, or crackers	Small muffins, white rolls, specialty breads
Vegetables	Raw vegetables, green salads, baked potatoes, steamed plain vegetables, or plain stir-fry vegetables	Vegetables in butter or with sauces, salad dressings (ask for them on the side and use sparingly), toppings for baked potato
Fruits	Fresh, frozen, or dried fruits, 100% fruit juice	Sweetened fruits, sorbet
Dairy products	Low-fat milk, low-fat yogurt (plain or with unsweetened fruit added)	Cheese, creamed soups, sherbet, low-fat frozen yogurt, ice milk
Meat, poultry, fish, dried beans, eggs, nuts	Lean meats cooked by broiling, steaming, roasting, baking, or poaching, if possible. Small sandwiches (limit toppings to lettuce, tomato, onion). Foods with dried beans (burritos, chili, etc.)	Grilled meats

Table from “Your Guide to Eating Out,” American Diabetes Association

### Foods to Limit

If you select foods from the above chart, you will be limiting your consumption of high-fat foods, such as fried foods, breaded meats, and other high-fat meats like sausage, bacon, and frankfurters. Other ways to reduce your consumption of high-fat foods include ordering salad dressings on the side and then only

using half (or less) on your salad, asking for low-fat cheese or choosing items without lots of cheese, and asking that they go “light” on any sauces, mayonnaise, gravy, butter, and margarine (or just leave these off completely). Occasionally choose low-fat frozen yogurt instead of ice cream or shakes. The whole family can also usually share one or two orders of dessert.

Order low-fat milk with meals and avoid sugared soft drinks and milkshakes. Sparingly use ketchup, pickle relish, jelly, honey, fat-free salad dressing (many are high in sugar), or BBQ sauce in order to keep your sugar consumption to a minimum.

If you need to limit your sodium intake, watch out for restructured poultry and meat (chicken nuggets, some roast beef), sausage, ham, and bacon, as all are high in sodium. Other products high in sodium include pickles or pickled products, salad dressings, some cheeses, biscuits, soy sauce, and monosodium glutamate (MSG).

## Conclusion

Eating at a restaurant or getting take-out meals can be a part of a healthy diet and making family meals together a reality. Just be sure to decide on family guidelines for eating out and help everyone make low-fat, healthy food choices following MyPyramid recommendations.

## References

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