

Eating Out with Diabetes: Making Healthier Choices at Restaurants

SANDY HAGGARD – NUTRITION, FOOD SAFETY, AND HEALTH AGENT

Managing diabetes does not mean giving up the enjoyment of dining out. With a little planning and a few smart strategies, people with diabetes can make restaurant meals fit into a healthy eating plan.

One of the best ways to make healthier choices is to plan ahead. Many restaurants provide menus and nutrition information online, allowing diners to review options before arriving. Look for menu items described as baked, broiled, grilled, roasted, or steamed, as these preparation methods are often lower in fat. Limit items described as battered, breaded, crispy, fried, smothered, scalloped, or au gratin, which are typically higher in calories and fat. Foods labeled as barbecue, cured, pickled, smoked, teriyaki, or marinated may also contain higher amounts of sodium.

Restaurant portions are often larger than needed. Consider sharing an entrée with a friend or asking for a take-home container when the meal arrives and setting aside half for another meal. This simple step can help prevent overeating while providing a second meal for later.

Using visual cues can also help with portion control. Three ounces of meat is about the size of a deck of playing cards. One cup of cooked rice is roughly the size of a tennis ball, while one cup of ready-to-eat cereal is about the size of a baseball. A serving of cheese is similar in size to a pair of dice, one tablespoon of oil is about the size of a poker chip, and a serving of nuts is approximately the size of a golf ball.

When ordering, ask for dressings, gravies, and sauces on the side so you can control how much is used. Grilled or steamed vegetables often make nutritious side choices. Ordering from the à la carte menu can also be a good way to create a balanced meal without oversized portions.

Fast-food restaurants can offer healthier choices as well. Skip extra cheese, special sauces, and bacon when possible. Choose grilled chicken sandwiches instead of fried options, and consider a side salad, fruit, or another vegetable-based side instead of French fries. Water or unsweetened tea are good beverage choices.

Specific cuisines can also be navigated with a few simple adjustments. At Italian restaurants, choose tomato-based sauces instead of rich cream sauces. For Chinese food, select steamed dishes with extra vegetables and limit deep-fried appetizers. At Mexican restaurants, salsa is often a healthier option than sour cream or queso-based toppings, and chicken fajitas can provide a satisfying combination of lean protein and vegetables.

Breakfast can be another opportunity to make smart choices. Whole-wheat toast, eggs, fruit, and lower-sugar beverages can help start the day on a healthy note. Flavored coffee drinks can contain surprising amounts of added sugar, so checking nutrition information may be helpful.

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For those looking to learn more about healthy eating while managing diabetes, the Southwind Extension District will offer the four-week Dining with Diabetes program beginning September 8 at the Erie Senior Center. Classes will meet from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. on Tuesdays, September 8, 15, and 22, skip September 29, and conclude on October 6. Participants will learn practical strategies for managing diabetes while enjoying samples of diabetes-friendly recipes each week. A follow-up session will be held three months later at no additional cost to discuss progress and outcomes. Previous programs were held in Iola and Fort Scott.

The registration fee is \$25 and helps cover the cost of food and educational materials. To enroll in Dining with Diabetes or learn more about nutrition, food safety, and health programs offered through K-State Extension Southwind District, contact Sandy Haggard, Nutrition, Food Safety, and Health Agent, at 620-365-2242 or SJHaggard@ksu.edu.

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