

10 Healthy Tips for Eating Out With Your Family

Pressed for time? Here's how to dine out without setting back your nutrition plan.

By Pamela Nisevich Bede, M.S., R.D..

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Now that school is in session, and your family is likely returning to the daily grind, you might be relying just a bit more on fast food and restaurant fare. But as fall racing season is in full swing, you don't want to undo all those long runs and hard workouts by letting your nutrition status slide. Understandably, you might balk every time one of your family members or—horror of horrors!—running partners suggests recovering with a trip through the drive-thru. But don't freak out—here are some tips to keep your taste buds satisfied, your family happy, and your training on the right track.

1. Plan ahead. There's a reason this tip is #1; a good plan is the best tool a runner can have in his or her "I'm hungry, feed me RIGHT now" nutrition arsenal. Planning ahead may save you from saying yes to the double-deep-fried pie and getting so ravenous that anything and everything on the menu looks tasty. In other words, you'll be equipped to make healthier choices. Plan ahead, and pack yourself some snacks for when the hungries hit. If you know you're going to be heading out to eat, take a moment to research the menu ahead of time. This way you'll have a better understanding of healthy options and have a plan in place for what to order.

2. Try something new. When dining out, why not try a place that offers lean local fare as opposed to everything-fried American fare? And while you're out, encourage your friends, family, and kids to do the same. You never know, you might just stumble upon your new favorite health dish.

3. French fries are not the only option. (And maybe they shouldn't be an option at all.) If you're ordering French fries every single time you go out, it's high time to opt for something else. Creamy, rich, and crispy side items can pack a punch when it comes to calories and fat, so opt for something nutritionally dense, such as steamed asparagus, grilled vegetables, fruit kabobs, or another colorful side option loaded with nutrients. Your waistline, health, and mile time will thank you later.

4. Sauce on the side please! When you order rich sauces, dressings, and gravy on the side, you can determine your own portion of these hidden-calorie gems. Dip your fork rather than smothering your food with these sauces; you'll want to use sparingly since creamy dips, oil-based dressings, and secret sauces usually contain loads of calories, sodium, and fat.

5. We all love to get the most bang for our buck, but all-you-can-eat buffets are simply not the answer. Certainly, to the ravenous runner who just logged 15 miles, a loaded buffet may seem like the perfect place to recover. But avoid overcompensating by eating each and every one of the calories you just burned off (and then some). Buffets are rarely a lean, steamed, veggie-lovers paradise. Instead, they offer tantalizing, golden-fried, all-you-can-eat, portion-distortion, high-calorie entrees and sides. So your best bet is to dine somewhere else entirely.

6. Learn to share. Consider sharing that platter that's as big as your head. You'll still leave full and satisfied, but you won't have to be rolled to your car. No one wants to share? Don't hesitate to ask your waiter for a take-home box when they bring out the meal. Portion off some of the meal, and voila! You've got tomorrow's lunch ready to go.

7. Say no to super-sizing. To some ravenous runners, a bucket of fries or chicken might seem like just the thing to quiet hunger pangs. But I'm likely preaching to the choir when I say that your health and waistline are likely to disagree. No matter how hungry you might be or how many miles you just put in, burritos as large as your head, gallon gulps, free toppings of cheesy sauce, and extra-large side items should be replaced with moderate portions of the original items. Any void can be filled by lean, whole-grain, and vegetable items. Practice it now: "Would you like to super-size your meal and waistline for just 30 cents more?" Your answer: A polite but adamant, "No, thank you."

8. I was a pediatric dietitian in a former life, so I feel compelled to warn parents against seemingly "kid-friendly" items. You likely already know this: Kids' meals can be loaded with calories, fat, and fillers that neither young nor old need to consume. Seemingly pint-sized meals weigh in at over 1000 calories—more calories than your little one might need in an entire day! Instead of ordering from the kids' menu, try ordering a healthy choice off the adult menu, and either request a smaller portion, split the meal, or simply take leftovers home.

9. Try not to drink your calories. Sure it's okay to imbibe every once and a while, but there are few calorie-containing beverages that actually benefit your health. Certainly low-fat milk, recovery drinks, sports drink, and even some 100% fruit juices may find their way into a healthy diet, and research has found that there may even be some health benefits to beer and wine. But frou frou drinks that pack 300+ calories a serving really aren't your best bet.

10. Keep your eye on the finish line. It's important to remember the big picture and think of eating out in the context of your whole diet and day-to-day pattern of eating. If you're headed out to dinner to celebrate a new PR, by all means, enjoy. (But do try to make the rest of your meals that day extra healthy.)