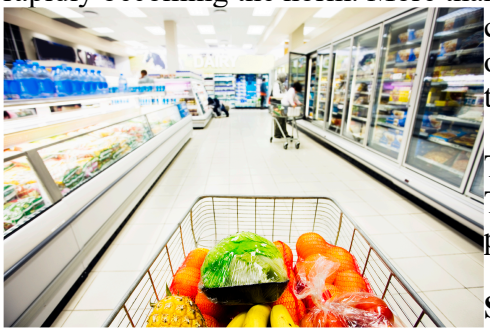
Healthy eating in a fast food world

In today's world, where time is precious and convenience is essential, a quick stop at a drive-through is rapidly becoming the norm. More than 20 per cent of all meals are eaten somewhere other than home and come from fare not found in the four food groups. The increases in obesity, diabetes and other serious health problems can be traced back to poor eating habits and over-processed foods.



The good news is that it's never too late to change your eating habits. The tips below can help you get out of the fast food lane and hop on the path to better health.

Shop smart. Healthy eating starts in the grocery store. Healthy choices can easily be sabotaged by a quick trip down the candy aisle. Try shopping around the perimeter of the store, where less processed foods like fruit and vegetables are usually found. If you must venture down the 'riskier' inner aisles, bring a list and stick to it.

Get the whole family involved in planning meals and let everyone contribute to the menu. There are many healthy eating cookbooks on the market that will help plan for meals that can be made ahead of time, and frozen for later dinners. Most importantly, don't go shopping on an empty stomach or you may leave the store weighed down with quick-fix junk foods.

Fool fast food. It would be great to never set foot in another fast food restaurant, but since that's unlikely, choose healthier options when you do go. Skip the processed cheese, order sauces and dressings on the side and opt for smarter choices like grilled chicken, fish or even a small hamburger. Picking lighter foods can cut fat by half.

Never "super size" your meal and skip the fries altogether. Research shows that French fries are the most eaten vegetable, both inside and outside the home, and are loaded with the unhealthiest of saturated fats.

Slash sugar. Spice is nice, but the sugar sure isn't. Loaded with calories and devoid of nutritional value, this culprit contributes to type 2 diabetes, obesity, tooth decay and greater risk of heart attack, stroke and cancer.

Avoid sugary breakfast cereals, candies and store-bought baked goods. Remember that pop is stacked with sugar and should be a treat, not an everyday drink. Juice, even unsweetened, also contains sugar, so reduce your intake by watering it down. Better yet, eat fruit instead of drinking it to gain the added benefit of fibre. Drinking water is the best option of all. Aim for eight glasses a day.

Pay attention. Many people keep eating when food is in front of them, even if they are no longer hungry, when watching TV, chatting on the phone or racing to a meeting. Try not to eat when your attention is elsewhere. If you must, ration the food so you can't overeat.

Understanding portion sizes can make a huge difference to health and weight as well. To put it in perspective, one serving or three ounces of meat looks like a deck of cards and one cup of potatoes, rice or pasta, like a tennis ball. It's a long way off from a 20-ounce steak, or the massive plate of fettuccine Alfredo often served at restaurants.

Snack often. Snacking is important for fuelling the body between meals. To avoid snack stops at fast food restaurants or convenience stores, pack your bag with healthy snacks from home. Tasty options include wholegrain crackers, fruit, vegetables, yogurt and nuts. Satisfying your hunger during the day will also help quell overeating at mealtime.

Break the cycle. Sugar, fat and salt create an addiction-like craving if consumed frequently in large amounts. Eating fast food more than triples the intake of these ingredients, as opposed to their homemade counterparts. But, as your body gradually gets used to high levels of these foods, it can adjust to life without unhealthy additives as well. Follow the suggestions above and avoid eating out and soon you'll be craving fruit instead of French fries.

Treat yourself to healthy eating. Most people think eating healthy means boring, tasteless food. This couldn't be further from the truth. There are endless great-tasting healthy food options. Be sure to follow the 90/10 rule. Make healthy choices 90 per cent of the time and leave the other 10 for indulgences. It's worth the trade off: more energy, improved health and no guilt about your diet.

It’s easy to get stuck in a cycle of fast and convenience foods when you are on the go. By eating a healthy, well-balanced diet, your body is guaranteed the nutrients it needs. In return, you get higher energy levels, increased brain function, stronger bones and muscles and protection from disease. A big payoff for a little effort.