

Overview

The typical American eats out an average of four times per week, and it is not unusual for us to choose foods which come from other countries or cultures (called ethnic foods). The most popular ethnic foods are Mexican, Italian and Chinese foods. While eating out is a pleasurable part of life, the types and amounts of food that are eaten will affect blood glucose levels. Because these ethnic foods are so popular, it's important to have a good understanding of how they can fit into a meal plan.

What should you choose at a Mexican restaurant?

Some of the basic ingredients found in Mexican foods are actually low in fat; things like corn, beans, tomatoes and flour tortillas. However, beware of things that sound healthy but may have extra lard or fat added to them, like refried beans or deep-fried hard taco shells. Also, many Mexican dishes contain a lot of cheese and sour cream – which are high in fat and calories. Ask for items with sour cream, cheese and guacamole on the side. Request extra salsa to add flavor--it is low in fat and calories

Because Mexican foods are based on corn, flour, rice and beans, it's possible to eat a lot of carbohydrate (also called starch) when eating a Mexican meal. Eating larger than normal amounts of them can cause your blood glucose level to rise too high. So, be careful how many nachos or tortilla chips you eat if they are served as an appetizer. Try to eat moderate portions of foods – the same that you would if you were fixing them at home.

What should you choose at an Italian restaurant?

Like Mexican foods, many traditional Italian foods are starchy, so decide ahead of time if you are going to have garlic bread, rolls, or breadsticks. If you choose to enjoy them, it may be best to order a chicken or fish dish, which has only a small portion of pasta with it. This way, you will not have too much carbohydrate at one time. Also, many Italian restaurants serve bread and olive oil as an appetizer. Remember, one tablespoon of olive oil has 120 calories and about 15 grams of fat. You can save calories and fat by having just one piece of plain bread, or by ordering a salad with low fat dressing instead. It is best to avoid pastas stuffed with meat or cheese, as they tend to be among the highest in fat and calories. The side portion of pasta is usually about one to one and a half cups and fits into most diets easier than an entrée-sized portion, which is often three cups. Grilled chicken, fish, or veal are often served with vegetable-based or wine-based sauces. They will have less calories and fat than Italian sausage or other Italian meats.

What should you choose at a Chinese restaurant?

Many Chinese/Asian choices are healthy if cooked by steaming, boiling or stir-frying. Another healthy bonus is that many Asian dishes contain substantial amounts of vegetables. Portions of meat and chicken are also generally smaller - which should fit into your meal plan better. Vegetarian meals with stir-fried or grilled vegetables are good choices. It's okay to add chicken, seafood or lean beef to these stir-fries as well. Stay away from fried rice and crispy noodles. Try to avoid chicken, seafood, or meat dishes that are breaded or fried. Be careful with sauces on Chinese dishes. Many are sweet and count toward your carbohydrate intake. Clear sauced dishes are better choices than the sweet garlic or sweet-n-sour sauces. You can ask that your meal be prepared with a minimum amount of oil and soy sauce, and just enough broth to allow cooking of the vegetables/meat.

Because rice is a carbohydrate, a large portion of even steamed white rice can cause your blood glucose to go higher than usual. Have a moderate portion of rice and lots of vegetables and chicken or fish, instead.

Other Ethnic Meals

There are many other types of ethnic restaurants and cuisine that are popular – such as Indian, French, German, etc. See the “Important Things to Remember” section below for general guidelines on healthier choices with all types of ethnic foods. If there is a certain type of ethnic cuisine that you enjoy regularly, you may wish to contact a registered dietitian to assist you in understanding the best choices.

Important Things to Remember

- When eating out at ethnic restaurants look over the menu and ask for an explanation of any items or cooking methods that you may not be familiar with. A general guideline is to choose meals that are lower in fat by limiting fried foods, rich sauces, oils, margarine and butter.
- Eat moderate portions and take home part of your meal if the portion served is large.
- Try to eat balanced meals – meals that contain a combination of starches, vegetables, fruits and proteins. Consider ordering a la carte. This way, you avoid getting extra foods that may not fit into your meal plan.
- Ask for substitutions – low fat salad dressing instead of regular salad dressing, low fat milk instead of cream, for example.

How Can Your Doctor Help You?

If you are not certain of the best way to choose your meals when eating ethnic foods, your doctor will be able to refer you to a dietitian or diabetes educator, or possibly provide you with sample menus. Your doctor can also inform you of any other dietary needs that you might have to maintain good health (such as low sodium to help control blood pressure.)

Quiz

1. Which of the following ethnic foods is not a carbohydrate food?
 - a) Tortillas
 - b) Pasta
 - c) Guacamole
 - d) Fried rice
2. A healthy bonus for Chinese foods is that many dishes contain substantial amounts of _____.
3. True or False: In an Italian restaurant, sausage and peppers is a healthier choice.

Answers: 1) c, 2) vegetables, 3) False