

Drive-thru Diet: Can You Really Lose Weight from the Comfort of Your Car?

Surely you've been at least slightly intrigued by Taco Bell's new ad campaign that leads you to believe that their new spokesperson, Christine, has lost 54 pounds in the past couple of years by eating drive thru food from Taco Bell. Could this possibly be the case?

As with many concepts in the field of nutrition and weight control – “If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is”. If you actually go to the Drive-thru Diet website (www.drivethrudiet.com)...and then take the time to read/listen to the plethora of caveats, disclaimers and fine print, you'll learn that Taco Bell doesn't consider the “Drive Thru Diet” a weight loss diet at all. Christine admits, “These results aren't typical, but for me, they were fantastic!”. She goes on to explain that she lost weight by lowering her caloric intake to 1,250, choosing “Fresco” items from Taco Bell, and “making other sensible choices”. Let's see... “sensible choices” and a “reduced caloric intake”...sounds like a recipe for weight loss to me, Taco Bell or not.

So what does the Drive-thru Diet, er, wait a minute...Taco Bell says it's *not* a diet...entail? Taco Bell's Drive-thru Diet consists of 7 items on the Fresco menu that are lower in fat and calories than their regular counterparts. One of the main differences is the substitution of salsa (10 calories for 2 tbsp) for cheese (100 calories per ounce). The items include:

Fresco Crunchy Taco: 150 calories, 7g of fat

Fresco Soft Taco-Beef: 180 calories, 7g of fat

Fresco Burrito Supreme-Chicken: 340 calories, 8 g of fat

Fresco Burrito Supreme-Steak: 330 calories, 8g of fat

Fresco Ranchero Chicken Soft Taco: 170 calories, 4g of fat

Fresco Grilled Steak Soft Taco: 160 calories, 4.5g of fat

Fresco Bean Burrito: 340 calories, 8g of fat

The Fresco menu has actually been around at Taco Bell for 6 years, but consumers had to look for it inside. The items are being “re-marketed” for the drive thru consumer (70% of Taco Bell's business). In addition to the menu items, Taco Bell's website offers additional tips for healthy living.

From a nutritional standpoint, the Fresco items are a step-up from common fast food fare (Big Mac: 540 calories, 29g of fat, medium fries: 380 calories, 19g of fat). I particularly like the 11g of fiber in the Fresco Bean Burrito and the 18g of protein in the chicken Fresco Burrito Supreme, because these two nutrients can help you feel full longer. Generally speaking, the portions, calorie, fat and fiber contents of all the Drive Thru Diet items are preferable to many other typical fast food meals, but the items aren't necessarily “fountains of nutrition” either. The sodium levels are quite high, whole grains are scarce, and vitamin, mineral content is marginal.

The “rule of thumb” I often use when helping clients make sensible choices from fast food restaurants is 500 calories per meal. The Drive-thru Diet items all fall well below that, which initially sounds good...except that if you don't get enough at mealtime, you'll be likely to overindulge later. Case in point: the Fresco Crunchy Taco. The total fat grams are kept low because the taco is so small. Closer analysis will show you that almost half of the calories in that little taco are coming from fat. And with only 150 calories and a measly 7g of protein, this

simply won't fill you up. It may be appropriate to consume one of these tacos as a snack...just enough to get you through your next class, meeting, whatever, so you can get home to make a wholesome, nutritious meal yourself. On the opposite end of the spectrum, people may end up overindulging from the Drive Thru Diet menu, mistakenly believing, "This is diet food – I can have all I want".

It's refreshing to see at least some improvement in the offerings at the drive thru windows, but fast food should still only be consumed OCCASIONALLY. It's always best to control the ingredients and preparation techniques of your food yourself – and the best way to do that is to prepare your own meals/snacks at home, consuming a variety of whole grains, fruits, and veggies while including smaller amounts of low fat dairy, lean proteins/meats, and healthy oils.

BOTTOM LINE: The *occasional* use of Taco Bell's Drive-thru Diet menu items can be part of a healthy lifestyle...and even a weight loss regime. Lighter options from other fast food restaurants (McDonald's grilled chicken salads, Burger King's veggie burger) can play the same role. It's important to understand that Christine's successful weight loss of 54 pounds was the result of 2 years of commitment to lifestyle change and a reduced calorie intake. While changing her habits she relied, in part, on the convenience of Taco Bell's lower fat items, but these items, in and of themselves were not the solution to her weight problem.