

Think Twice Before Eating Out

I've heard it often, "I eat out a lot, but I know how to make good choices. I order the healthy stuff." What people don't understand is that even when they THINK they are being "good", odds are, their choices are not as healthy as they think.

Some menu items "sound" healthy, but aren't. Think about Panera's Sierra Turkey Sandwich. What could be wrong with a turkey breast sandwich, right? The size of the bread as well as the chipotle mayo on this sandwich bring the calories to over 900 with 54 grams of fat! This healthy-sounding sandwich has almost double the calories and over 1.5 times the fat in a Big Mac.

Most would be surprised to hear how many calories are in a Starbucks zucchini walnut muffin – I mean, zucchini – green veggies – gotta be good for you! Walnuts: heart healthy. But this muffin has 490 calories and 28 grams of fat. Who would've thought you could get more protein and less sugar and fewer calories in Starbucks' ham/cheddar sandwich on an artisan roll (370 calories, 16g of fat)?

And far too often, I've had clients "boast" to me about their healthy transformations...passing up Bill Millers during the lunch rush and heading to Subway instead. I feel bad busting their bubble after they proudly tell me they chose the 6" tuna sub. I just wouldn't be honest if I didn't tell them that while the tuna fish itself is a nutritious source of protein, the mayo-rich 6" sub, as a whole, has 1 more fat gram than a Big Mac and only 10 fewer calories.

I often suggest my clients review menu and nutrition info online before dining out to help make healthier choices. But not even this strategy is fool proof. Last year the Journal of the American Dietetic Association published a study that took a close look at inaccuracy in restaurant nutrition information. Researchers found an average of 18% MORE calories than what the restaurants published on their websites and nutrition handouts. And some extreme discrepancies existed. Seven of the 29 items in the study actually contained DOUBLE what the restaurants said they did!

More interesting research about our behaviors in restaurants was published in the Journal of Consumer Research. Researchers found that people tend to underestimate their intake by about 35% when they are eating at a restaurant that offers healthy choices. For example, if you used your will power to order that grilled chicken salad instead of the rack of ribs and guessed how many calories were in it, you'd guess 350, when in actuality you would've consumed closer to 475. Also interesting, is that consumers tended to make poorer and more indulgent food choices when both "healthy" and "unhealthy" choices were offered than when the "unhealthy" choices were offered alone. For example, when selecting an item from a menu that contains burgers and salads, a generally health-conscious person would be more likely to get the double cheeseburger; whereas, if there were only burgers and fries on the menu, that same consumer would be more likely to get the single

burger, omitting the special sauce. It appears that the mere presence of healthy items on the menu promotes feelings of justification for less-than-ideal choices to prevail.

You can study the menu. You can quiz the wait staff about preparation techniques and ingredients. You can special order to your heart's content, but you still have no way of knowing EXACTLY what's going on back in the kitchen. Restaurants are in business to make money...not to make you healthy or thin.

Does that mean you should never, ever, ever eat out? Of course not. One "splurge meal" every once in a while isn't going to make you fat or unhealthy, so just keep your restaurant meals to a minimum (once a week or so). Reserve restaurant meals for special occasions/celebrations, not for the sake of convenience. If you are mostly eating healthy foods prepared at home where you can control the added fat, sodium, and /or sugars (whole grains, plenty of fruits/veggies, low fat dairy, lean proteins), you can enjoy yourself at that occasional restaurant meal and not worry about special-ordering to omit all the stuff that makes restaurant food taste so good in the first place! An added benefit...eating more homemade food will save you money, so you'll have a little extra to spend while splurging on that occasional restaurant meal.