



News Column for Week of January 14, 2019

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Fast Food or Healthy Food? You Can Do Both with Planning and Smart Choices

Many commit to healthy eating as a New Year's resolution and halfway into the month of January, they may be finding it a challenge. Time to cook and busy schedules top the list of what make healthy eating hard. In the rush of daily life, eating at fast food restaurants is often the default choice for getting through the to-do list.

The concern, says K-State Research and Extension nutrition specialist Sandy Procter, is that many fast food choices can lead to unhealthy eating.

In October, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control released results of a study from 2013 to 2016 concluding that more than one in three adults consume fast food on any given day.

"It's not the fast food that's the problem," Procter said. "It's the net result of portions that are too big and sometimes contain unhealthy ingredients."

Convenience is the No. 1 reason why most people choose fast food. The relatively inexpensive cost, the fact that we like it and a lack of alternatives are other top reasons.

"I don't think we are going to change the fact that many adults on many days of the week take fast food as an option, but I think if we look into it a little more deeply, we can all be better in control of what that means to our health and our diets in general," Procter said.

She added that one key to avoiding unhealthy choices at fast food restaurants is to plan ahead. That could mean packing your lunch – or even part of the meal – the night before to avoid rushing out without food in the morning.

"When I say part of a lunch, that really helps," Procter said. "If you do have to grab some fast food, you don't have to accept what they offer as sides. You don't have to get the full meal deal. You can order a small, single sandwich or wrap...and add those foods that you chose to bring along with you."

Plus, planning ahead saves money and helps control the amount you eat.

“A lot of times, you can get those less expensive sandwiches,” Procter said. “They may cost less, and the portioning of those is going to be a lot healthier. There isn’t anything inherently wrong with fast food, but it becomes a problem when the portions are so large and the choices we make contain unhealthy aspects. We can do a lot about those just as wise consumers.”

Procter noted that consumers also can check out nutrition information online for many restaurant chains.

“So even if it’s not posted at the point of sale, you can find out about those choices that you automatically make,” she said, adding that knowing nutrition information could help you cut calories and eat more healthfully.

“It’s about taking control of the way I would like things to be, and finding a way to make it work for me. I think that is part of my job as a responsible consumer.”

Additional tips that Procter provided for avoiding unhealthy choices when eating on-the-go include:

- Split meals with a family member or friend. Portion sizes are often too large for one, but just right for two.
- Pack snacks or parts of a meal for traveling, especially when flying. You can supplement with small, healthy choices in the airport.
- Choose water instead of sodas or other high-calorie drinks.
- Consider purchasing a ‘Kids Meal,’ even if you have to pay a small up-charge.
- Go light on the add-ons, such as dressing, cheese, macaroni salad, heavy sauces and other toppings.

For more ideas on healthy eating, contact Kathy at kmcewan@ksu.edu or by phone at 620-365-2242. Check out the Southwind Extension District website at www.southwind.ksu.edu.