



# *Eating Well on the Go:* **No Longer the Road Less Traveled**

By Jessica Schulman, PhD, MPH, RD

**E**ating well when away from home can be challenging. Some obstacles are physical, such as when your plane is stuck on the tarmac, and some are social, like when your family wants to comfort you with an exuberant rack of homemade country ribs and cheesy smashed potatoes. Sometimes you have to make the best of food served at a hospital, conference center or in transit to your vacation spot. Whether you are traveling for healthcare, business or pleasure, eating away from home can upset your routine, placing you in a situation that makes it difficult to eat well. Is it possible to make nutritious choices while traveling? Yes! This article reviews useful strategies for eating well when away from home.

## Planning Ahead

Americans spend more today than ever on foods eaten away from home. From 1992 to 2002, the total amount spent jumped from \$263 billion to \$415 billion, a 58% increase.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, the public has demanded healthier choices when eating out, and the food service industry has responded by offering a wider variety of menu options. As a result, it is possible to eat nutritious meals while traveling—but it does require that you plan ahead. Before you go, and not after you arrive, is the best time to work out reasonable solutions to the potential challenges of dining out. Answering the following questions can help you prepare to make choices that are consistent with your personal diet plan.

1. What are your nutrition goals or plan?
2. What are examples of foods that are often available and not consistent with your dietary plan?
3. What are examples of foods that are better choices and might actually be available on your travels?
4. What action will you take to ensure that healthy meals are accessible on your travels?

## How to Eat Out Well

When you call ahead to make hotel reservations, ask the concierge or receptionist to suggest food service establishments. You can request the restaurant's phone number or website, or even ask that a copy of the menu be sent to you. When in doubt, choose restaurants that have vegetarian options—they are more likely to offer healthy fare and make other food accommodations.

When you arrive at the restaurant, do not hesitate to ask for a special order. Cooks in the United States are accustomed to honoring requests for dressings, sauces or butters on the side, and some will make more complicated substitutions. Remember to be courteous to waitstaff so they will be more considerate about accommodating your needs. Consider starting with something like, "I know that you are busy, but may I ask you some questions about the menu?" The following table provides ideas for restaurant substitutions based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (the guidelines do not apply to young children). Always check with your healthcare provider to see what diet is best for you. ➤

Instead of:	Ask for:
Fried Sautéed in butter Stir-fried Anything with or in butter (or hollandaise, béarnaise) Basted	Grilled Broiled Steamed Poached Baked Roasted
Au Gratin Escalloped	Lightly sautéed Lightly stir-fried
White bread Breakfast pastries	Whole grain or whole wheat breads, bagels, cereals
Continental breakfast	Fruit Yogurt Oatmeal Whole grain breads Cereals
Beef	Fish Shrimp Lobster Poultry
<i>(continued next page)</i>	



<sup>1</sup> Stewart H, Blisard N, Bhuyan S, Nayga R Jr., The demand for food away from home: Full service or fast food? *Agricultural Economic Report No.* 829. p.1, Jan. 2004.

Instead of:	Ask for:
Fatty cuts of meat Rib-eye Porterhouse T-bone	Leaner cuts of meat London broil Filet mignon Round or flank steak Sirloin tip Tenderloin
Pre-tossed salad	Dressing on the side Flavored vinegars
Unspecified sandwiches, wraps, burritos, etc.	Dressings or nutrient-poor toppings to be used sparingly
Whole milk (cold or in hot drinks)	Fat-free / low-fat milk
Mayonnaise Butter Margarine Sour cream Sauces (cheese, tartar, etc.) Gravy	Ketchup Mustard Low-fat ranch dressing Yogurt Balsamic vinegar Salsa Cocktail sauce Grated Parmesan cheese (1 tsp)
Soda Fruit drinks or punch	Bottled water with lemon Dilute highly sweetened drinks (1 part water: 1 part drink) Unsweetened tea Flavored waters Broth
Creamed soup	
Salt Mixed unspecified seasonings	Lemon Roasted, fresh or powdered garlic Herbs such as dill, tarragon, cilantro and basil
Cheesecake, ice cream, chocolate chip cookies	Plain flavors (not super premium brands with toppings) Hot milk with a shot of syrup or chocolate cocoa flakes Angel food cake Fruit Biscotti Unspecified: control the portion by sharing dessert

More tips for eating standard or international fare are located at:  
[www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=531](http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=531)

### Fast Food and Fast Casual

According to the American Public Health Association, consumers are unaware of the high levels of calories, saturated fat, and sodium in fast-food meals.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, items on fast-food menus are often low in nutritious content such as essential fatty acids, fiber, vitamins and minerals. What are better choices when eating fast or convenience food? Aim for grilled chicken sandwiches, premium salads with low-fat dressing, or even a small (2-ounce) burger with lettuce and tomato. Instead of fries, a baked potato with low-fat dressing or ketchup is a good choice. Grilled vegetarian sandwiches, chicken fajitas and black bean burritos are other decent options, whereas fried fish sandwiches will derail any balanced nutrition plan. Dietary information is available to consumers at most fast-food establishments or online. Here is a selection of websites that list menu items with calories, fat and sodium content that you can print.

#### Fast food nutrition websites

##### Baja Fresh®

[www.bajafresh.com/jump.jsp?itemType=CATEGORY&itemID=68&iMainCat=4&iSubCat=10&i3Cat=68](http://www.bajafresh.com/jump.jsp?itemType=CATEGORY&itemID=68&iMainCat=4&iSubCat=10&i3Cat=68)

##### Carl's Junior®

[www.carlsjr.com/content\\_svn/downloads/nutrition.pdf](http://www.carlsjr.com/content_svn/downloads/nutrition.pdf)

##### McDonald's®

[app.mcdonalds.com/countries/usa/food/nutrition/categories/nutritionfacts.pdf](http://app.mcdonalds.com/countries/usa/food/nutrition/categories/nutritionfacts.pdf)

##### Taco Bell®

[www.yum.com/nutrition/menu.asp?brandID\\_Abbr=5\\_TB](http://www.yum.com/nutrition/menu.asp?brandID_Abbr=5_TB)

<sup>2</sup> Burton S, Creyer EH, Kees J, Huggins K. Attacking the obesity epidemic: The potential health benefits of providing nutrition information in restaurants. *Am J Public Health* 2006;96:1669-1675.





Traditional sit-down restaurants have made it easier to take hot food to your home, hotel, or hospital room. These “fast casual” places include California Pizza Kitchen, Islands, The Cheesecake Factory, and many others. They allow you to call in your order, and food is brought to your car with curbside to-go service. Though they may offer more healthy choices, along with the traditional ones, be aware that the calories, fat, sodium and serving sizes tend to be larger (even gargantuan) than what is served at home. Nutrition experts Lisa Young, PhD, RD, and Marion Nestle, PhD, MPH, determined that restaurant portions are at least two times—and sometimes eight times—larger than standard serving sizes.<sup>3</sup> One slice of Godiva chocolate cheesecake from Cheesecake Factory, for example, contains more than 900 calories, while an actual serving of homemade cheesecake contains about 450 calories.

### Budgeting on the Fly

If you think you might have trouble sitting down for a meal, try to at least eat a snack. This way you will not be ravenous when a meal is available. The worst time to walk into a restaurant, or peruse the prepared food aisles, is when you are hungry. Variations in blood sugar, especially hypoglycemia, can affect judgment and make practicing moderation difficult.

Balancing food over the course of a day, or budgeting items that are not part of your plan, does not require precise calorie counting—unless you must follow a rigid diet. The idea is to informally assess what you have consumed and to balance that with what your intake ought to be over the course of the day. Maintaining a healthy weight requires you to balance your “energy in” and “energy out” over the long run. Refer to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2005, for recommendations on food and physical activity choices for health. At MyPyramid ([www.mypyramid.gov](http://www.mypyramid.gov)), you can determine your appropriate energy intake and number of servings for each food category. Because MyPyramid is not a therapeutic diet for any specific health problem, individuals living with medical conditions should ask their physicians about the diet that is right for them.

### Convenience Foods and Healthy Snacks

Convenience foods can be packed with your luggage and may come in handy. Items such as instant oatmeal and dehydrated soups (low-fat, low-sodium varieties) can be prepared in a hotel room with hot water from a coffeemaker or water that has been microwaved. Fresh fruit that you can peel, whole grain crackers and trail mix can help you get to the next healthy meal. When traveling by plane, you can pick up essential food items before boarding. Many airlines have cut back on food service options, but most will still provide special meals on request. Be sure to notify the carrier more than 24 hours before your flight. (A low-fat meal will typically offer more balanced and higher-quality protein sources than a “regular” in-flight meal.)

Once you arrive at your destination, you can pick up plenty of items locally to keep in your room. Most hotels can provide a small fridge and microwave, but always check before making reservations. These are a few convenient favorites:

- Whole wheat bread, bagels, crackers, cereals
- Mozzarella cheese sticks
- Fresh fruit (banana, oranges, avocado)
- Juice boxes, Gatorade®, bottled water
- Dried fruits (raisins, apricots, mango, etc.)
- Dehydrated soups
- Nuts and trail mix
- Yogurt
- Hummus by Sabra® ➤

<sup>3</sup> Young LR, Nestle M. Expanding portion sizes in the U.S. marketplace: Implications for nutrition counseling, *J Am Diet Assoc.* 2003 Feb;103(2):231-234.

- 100% whole grain Fig Newtons®
- Frozen meals (if a freezer is available)
  - Healthy Choice®, Flavor Adventures
  - Kashi®
  - Amy's®
- Energy bars with low sugar and moderate protein

### Airport Dining

The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM) surveyed access to healthy food choices in airport terminals across the U.S. It found that more than 80 percent

of restaurants at the 15 busiest U.S. airports surveyed offered at least one breakfast, lunch or dinner entrée that followed the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (e.g., low fat, cholesterol-free, high in fiber).<sup>4</sup> Following these guidelines has been shown to help manage weight as well as reduce the risk of heart disease; it also may be useful in treating diabetes. In PCRM's most recent report, airports were ranked based on the percent of restaurants that offered healthy meals. PCRM nutrition experts provide examples of healthful food offerings from each. Airports with the most healthy options are listed first.

Findings from PCRM's 2007 report about healthful airport food options	
Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport	Veggie noodle bowls and veggie sushi at Blue Bamboo Xpress, the spinach enchiladas at Cantina Laredo, and the black bean burgers at Bennigan's. Wendy's, where low-fat choices include baked potatoes, spring mix salads (minus the cheese), and veggie burgers.
Chicago O'Hare International Airport	Eat a Leaf's roasted vegetable sandwich; Ciao Gourmet Market's walnut and fruit salad with mixed greens, cranberries, strawberries, mandarin oranges and jicama; and Fox Skybox's portobello and red pepper brioche with basil and pine nuts (to make this dish low-fat, ask the server to hold the cheese).
Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport	Tailpipe Tap's Motown veggie sandwich, Max & Erma's grilled vegetable sandwich on ciabatta bread with tomato-basil spread (sans cheese), and the veggie stir-fry and almond rice salad at Mediterranean Grill.
Los Angeles International Airport	Vegetable fajitas at El Paseo, the vegetable sandwiches (minus the high-fat cheese) at Creative Croissants, and the roasted vegetable wraps at Eaterna.
Newark Liberty International Airport	Mixed vegetable and tofu stir-fry at Asian Chao, the custom-made salads and wraps at GreenLeaf's Grille, and the veggie burger (without cheese or mayo) at Dick Clark's Restaurant.
Denver International Airport	Made-to-order salads at Chef Jimmy's Bistro and Spirits, the beans and rice at Cantina Grill, and the portobello mushroom sandwiches and garden burgers at the various Lefty's Grille establishments.
Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport	Oaxaca's vegetable burritos and taco salad, Yoshi's Asian Grill's avocado cucumber sushi and edamame, and Roadhouse 66 Bar's veggie burgers and veggie pizza.
Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport	Caribou Coffee, with its grilled portobello mushroom wraps, black bean and tofu salads, and tabouli salads; and French Meadow Bakery & Café, which serves vegan chili, tofu salad and various soups and sandwiches.
San Francisco International Airport	Deli-up Café, which serves Middle Eastern platters; Ebisu, with its udon noodles in veggie broth and veggie sushi; and Max's Eatz, which serves a roasted veggie sandwich.
John F. Kennedy International Airport	Buddha's delight and broccoli with garlic sauce at Sky Asian Bistro, vegetable dumplings and grilled vegetable sandwiches at Soup & Kimbob, and vegetarian wraps at the various Cibo Express eateries.

<sup>4</sup> Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine. Airport food still healthful: More than 80 percent of restaurants offer low-fat vegetarian options, but some cities lag behind, Winter, 2007. Available at: [www.pcrm.org/health/reports/Airport\\_Food\\_Review\\_07.html](http://www.pcrm.org/health/reports/Airport_Food_Review_07.html)

Las Vegas McCarran International Airport	Prickly Pear Café, for its vegetable sandwiches; Don Alejandro’s Texan Grill, for its vegetable burritos (hold the cheese); and Sbarro, which offers steamed veggies as well as spaghetti with marinara sauce and salad.
Orlando International Airport	Thai peanut noodles and vegetable dumplings at Zyng. Travelers can create their own pasta at Macaroni Grill, which will leave out the cheese and substitute broccoli or spinach for the meat in any of its dishes. And Miami Subs offers veggie pitas as well as made-to-order vegetable sandwiches.
Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport	Vegan burritos at Qdoba Mexican Grill and the veggie wraps (minus the cheese) at Great Wraps. Also notable are the black bean patties at Chili’s Bar & Bites and the vegetable plate with black-eyed peas, green beans, cabbage, yams, corn and rice at Paschal’s Southern Delights.
Miami International Airport	California Pizza Kitchen’s smashed pea and barley soup, Casa Bacardi’s black bean and crispy rice salad, Jose Cuervo Tequileria offers jicama salad, and Café La Carreta features a buffet bar packed with salad, black beans, vegetables and rice.
Reagan National Airport	Matsutake Sushi’s vegetable combination roll, Cosi’s veggie chili, DC Samuel Adams’ vegetable sandwich (minus the cheese), and T.G.I. Friday’s portobello melt (also sans cheese).

### Can You Bring Food on Planes?

Though it has become much more difficult for passengers to bring food aboard planes, it is possible to carry on some small servings of nutritious foods as long as the rules of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) are honored ([www.tsa.gov/311/index.shtm](http://www.tsa.gov/311/index.shtm)). Formula, breast milk or juice will be inspected at the checkpoint, but containers larger than 3 ounces (and in reasonable quantities for the duration of your trip) should be permitted. (Breast milk is considered in the same category as liquid medications.) According to the TSA website, “You are allowed to bring gel or liquid-filled teething, canned, jarred or processed baby food in your carry-on baggage and aboard your plane.” For those with special dietary needs, liquids such as water, juice, nutrition supplements and frozen gel-consistency foods may be carried onboard. If they are in volumes larger than three ounces each, they may not be placed in the quart-size bag and instead must be declared to the TSA Security Officer. A separate, insulated bag may be useful for keeping the foods separate from other property submitted for X-ray screening. In addition, properly packed items may be placed in your luggage and checked at your airline counter. Always contact the airline in advance because these rules are subject to change without notice.

Drinks purchased in the secure boarding area can be brought onboard an aircraft. However, given the hectic environment at the airport, the cost of convenience items, and the likelihood that the only brand of juice

your child will drink will not be available, it is important to plan ahead. Stay well-hydrated the day before your flight and set aside important snack items for your trip. In addition, there may be delays and longer wait times at the airport, so if possible try to eat a nourishing meal in advance. For example, the morning of your trip, a peanut butter sandwich or scrambled egg may be a better choice than a bowl of corn flakes. Because many airlines have scaled back food services, a preflight meal that has adequate protein will help satiate you until you arrive at your destination and can scout out higher-quality food establishments.

### Summer Camps and Retreats

Most summer camps prohibit families from sending food with their children. According to Roy Oken, CEO and president of River Way Ranch Camp, children should never be sent to camp with food that is not authorized because of the risk of life-threatening food allergies to other campers, food-borne illnesses, and insects. However, special accommodations can usually be made if the child is on a special diet. With a secure fridge and microwave, just about any food can be prepared at camp.

Food and treatment needs must be taken seriously away from home. Oken explains: “If a child lives with diabetes or they have a milk allergy, we have the camp staff—aka camp ‘moms’—talk with the parents and make certain that the counselor is aware of what foods are on the diet plan and what foods are not.” Oken says that in special ➤

cases foods may be kept in the infirmary and “the camper can go there up to four times a day to get what they need.” If the child goes on an outside adventure, or an “outcamp,” the camp director is notified by the nurses to take any special food items along.

Camps or retreats for children or adults must support them in meeting their nutrition needs. Dietary modifications can be complicated, so never assume that the cooks or counselors know as much as your doctor or dietitian. Contact the camp director or nursing staff to find out how you or your child’s health needs will be met. Explain that nutrition is part of the treatment plan so that your child is comfortable and safe during his or her stay. Nancy Oken, executive director of River Way Ranch Camp, explains: “Everything humanly possible will be done at camp to guarantee the health, safety and happiness of your children.”

### Eating Away on an Extended Healthcare Stay

Eating a balanced diet is an integral part of a patient’s treatment, recovery and well-being. For this reason, food quality and choices in medical centers have improved. Still,

## Seaworthy Dining

Florence (Flo) Schulman, a retired professor of leisure management at Pierce College (and the author’s stepmom), encourages balance and moderation while sailing the Seven Seas. She explains that travelers can offset an unhealthy meal by eating well throughout the rest of the day. When Flo is on a cruise, she eats “healthy for breakfast, like Egg Beaters, oatmeal and fresh orange segments. For lunch, we try to avoid the main restaurant and stick to the salad bar. In the evening, we can really enjoy ourselves, celebrate with our friends, and choose a dessert.”

Still, she tries to make healthy choices in the evening and says, “My husband will order broiled fish almost every night, so that’s even healthier than back at home.”

She also recommends ordering sauces and dressings on the side so an entrée is not “smothered in empty calories.” She admits that it is not a perfect solution and points out that “when I have overdone it at a meal, I try to go easy the next day.” It is hard to have an ideal diet while on vacation, but Flo is realistic and admits, “We often gain a bit, about one pound a week is really what happens, but for others it is so much more than that.”

for many, the choices available in healthcare settings are not as appetizing as one would hope. Alternatives include 24-hour catering services and friends and family bringing in food to encourage proper intake. (Always make sure that foods brought to the patient are consistent with the diet, or “NPO” status, per doctor’s orders.) Nurses often lack the time to pay attention to their patients’ needs for assistance and socialization when eating. Often, caregivers end up helping out and become overwhelmed, thus neglecting their own needs for proper nutrition.

Places such as corporate housing, extended stay hotels, Ronald McDonald Houses and The Children’s Inn at NIH (National Institutes of Health) provide families with kitchen appliances or a stocked pantry. (See *Home Away From Home*, Page 9.) This is very helpful and enables families under stress to eat well. However, when you can hardly leave your loved one’s bedside, there may not be time to shop, cook and clean up.

If you are staying away from home for long stretches of time and dining out or cooking is not feasible, you can request a caregiver tray for a nominal fee at most hospitals. As an alternative, having frozen or dehydrated convenience items on hand may help. With a microwave and refrigerator, almost any balanced meal can be prepared. There are also plenty of Internet food vendors and full-service, personalized grocery shopping companies (e.g., [wegoshop.com](http://wegoshop.com), [peapod.com](http://peapod.com), [parkeastkosher.com](http://parkeastkosher.com)) that will deliver items directly to you. These services, or even shipping food from home, may be helpful for finicky children or individuals on restrictive diets.

With enough notice, one can prepare meals, freeze them, and then give a friend instructions on how to ship them to your location. It is essential that items are frozen and packed properly when food is shipped. Use foam or heavy corrugated cardboard and have it delivered overnight—even for smoked or cured items. Pack with frozen gel packs or dry ice. Before purchasing the dry ice, contact the postal carrier for instructions about how to pack it safely and how much you need (e.g., about two pounds of frozen items requires eight pounds of dry ice for overnight delivery). Label the outer package with “Keep Refrigerated” to alert the recipient. Make sure that perishable foods have remained frozen and are held at temperatures below 40 degrees F. As always, when in doubt, throw it out! ■

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*Editor’s note: This article is intended for general informational purposes only. Individuals with medical conditions—or those seeking nutritional advice—should consult their doctors to determine the diet that is appropriate for them.*