Personal Health

HEALTHY EATING IN A FAST FOOD WORLD

It's five o'clock. You're tired, hungry and can't wait to get home. On the way you pass a string of drive-thru restaurants. Unable to resist the hunger pangs, you stop in for a quick pick-me-up snack.

In today's world where time is precious and convenience is essential, this scene is rapidly becoming the norm. More than 20 per cent of all meals are eaten somewhere other than home and come from fare not found in the four food groups. The increase in and danger of developing obesity, diabetes and other serious health problems can be traced back to poor eating habits and over-processed foods. The good news is that it's never too late to change your eating habits. The tips below can help you get out of the fast food lane and hop on the path to better health.

Shop smart. Healthy eating starts in the grocery store where healthy choices can easily be sabotaged by a quick trip down the candy aisle. Try shopping around the perimeter of the store—where less processed foods like fruit and vegetables are usually found—to lessen the chance of piling up on unhealthy choices. If you must venture down the 'riskier' inner aisles, bring a list and stick to it. Get the whole family involved by pre-planning meals and letting everyone contribute to the menu. There are many healthy eating cookbooks on the market that will help plan for meals that can be made ahead of time, stored in the freezer and easily defrosted for weekly dinners. Most importantly, don't go shopping on an empty stomach or you may leave the store weighed down with quick-fix junk foods.

Fool fast food. It would be great if you never set foot in another fast food restaurant, but since that's unlikely, choose healthier options when you do go. Skip the processed cheese, order sauces and salad dressings on the side and opt for smarter choices like grilled chicken, fish or even a small hamburger. By picking foods from the lighter menu, you can cut fat intake by half. Never super size your meal and skip the French fries altogether. Research shows that French fries are the most eaten vegetable—both inside and outside the home—and are also loaded with the unhealthiest of saturated fats.

Slash sugar. Spice might be nice, but the sugar sure isn't. Loaded with calories and devoid of nutritional value, this culprit contributes to type 2 diabetes, obesity and puts you at greater risk of heart attack, stroke and cancer—not to mention causing tooth decay. Avoid sugary breakfast cereals, candies and store-bought baked goods which are often loaded with the sweet stuff. Remember too that pop is stacked with sugar and should be a treat, not an everyday drink. Juice, even unsweetened, also contains a lot so reduce your intake by watering it down. Better yet, eat your fruit instead of drinking it and you'll gain the added benefit of fibre. Drinking water is the best option of all. Aim for eight glasses a day.

Pay attention. Many people will keep eating when food is in front of them, even if they are no longer hungry. Often this happens when watching TV, chatting on the phone or racing to a morning meeting. Try not to eat when your attention is elsewhere. If you must, then ration the

food so you can't overeat. Understanding portion sizes can make a huge difference to your health and weight. To put it in perspective, one serving or three ounces of meat looks like a deck of cards and one cup of potatoes, rice or pasta, like a tennis ball. It's a long way off from a 20-ounce steak, or that massive plate of fettuccine Alfredo served at restaurants.

Snack often. Snacking is important for the body, fueling it between meals. Without a boost, you wouldn't perform at your best. To avoid those pit stops at fast food restaurants or convenience stores, pack you bag with healthy snacks from home. Tasty options include wholegrain crackers, fruit, vegetables, yogurt and nuts. And satisfying your hunger during the day will quell overeating at mealtime because you won't be overwhelmed by your hunger.

Break the cycle. Sugar, fat and salt create an addiction-like craving if consumed frequently and in large amounts. Eating fast food more than triples the intake of these ingredients as opposed to homemade counterparts. Like caffeine, if you don't get your regular dose of sugar, salt or fat, you'll crave it. But just as your body gradually got used to high levels of these foods, it can adjust to life without fast food and the unhealthy additives that come with it. Follow the suggestions above, avoid eating out and soon you'll be craving fruit instead of French fries.

Treat yourself to healthy eating. Most people think eating healthy means boring, tasteless food. This couldn't be further from the truth. There are endless great-tasting healthy food options around to nourish your body and mind. Be sure to follow the 90/10 rule. Make healthy choices 90 per cent of the time and leave the other 10 for indulgences. You might be surprised to find it's worth the trade off: more energy, improved health and no guilt about your diet.

By eating a healthy, well-balanced diet, your body is guaranteed the nutrients it needs. In return, you get higher energy levels, increased brain function, stronger bones and muscles and protection from disease.