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Healthy fast food choices on the rise, instead of your cholesterol level

By Susan Haine

Fast food: it's quick, it's convenient, but has it ever been called healthy?

Now, fast food chains are taking strides toward making their menus more nutritious, helping Americans move toward healthier diets, and, possibly, healthier lifestyles.

And the key ingredient in fueling this new trend toward healthier fast food — salad. However, it may not be as healthy as it seems.

UCSD nutritionist Katie Bogue says that salads are only a good choice if you choose the right kind of dressing. For example, without dressing, an Asian Chicken Salad at Jack in the Box has about 140 calories and one and one-half grams of fat. But if you add dressing, wonton strips and almonds, the salad's calories rise to 610 and the fat content is bumped up to 35 and one-half grams. The Chicken Fajita Pita is, then, a healthier option, with 330 calories and just 11 grams of fat.

Wendy's offers healthier salad dressing options, with fat-free french style dressing, which has 80 calories and no fat; low fat honey mustard, which has 110 calories and three grams of fat; and reduced fat creamy ranch, which has 100 calories and eight grams of fat. These dressings can be substituted for their full-fat dressings on any salad.

McDonald's offers one healthier dressing choice, a balsamic vinaigrette, which has 90 calories and eight grams of fat.

Making healthier choices at fast food restaurants can help lower the risk of heart diseases and heart attacks by reducing three major risk factors — high cholesterol, high blood pressure and obesity.

Foods that are high in saturated fats, such as a double cheeseburger, can lead to elevated blood cholesterol levels, therefore leading to a build-up of cholesterol in the blood vessels, making them narrower Bogue said. Smaller blood vessels make the heart work

harder to get them through the body, or worse, they can become completely blocked, which leads to a heart attack.

According to the American Heart Association, each day, more than 680 Americans die from sudden heart attacks.

Eating healthy helps reduce the risk of causing cholesterol buildup in the arteries. However, you don't have to eat like a rabbit to make healthier fast-food decisions.

Two problems occur when people choose to eat out at fast food restaurants, Bogue said. First, people eat out too often, on average four to five times each week.

Second, Americans tend to think bigger is better, and supersize all of their food. According to Bogue, the difference between a small, plain hamburger, small fries and a diet soda and a Big Mac, super size fries and a supersize soda is 900 calories and 43 grams of fat. That is almost half of what is recommended as the average adult's daily caloric intake and more than two-thirds of the recommended fat intake.

"I think it's unrealistic to expect people to go to McDonalds and order a side salad and a diet Coke," Bogue said. "Not to mention, it's a lot cheaper to order off the dollar menu. It goes back to how often people are going and the size they are ordering."

Bogue said one of the key ways to reduce calories and fat grams while eating out is by never supersizing. She also recommends reducing soda intake, and just drinking one small soda during a fast food visit, avoiding refills, because the calories add up. Also, try to share a meal or don't finish the whole thing, this reduces caloric intake.

The best fast food options besides salads are grilled chicken sandwiches. McDonalds offers the Chicken McGrill, which has 400 calories and 17 grams of fat, compared to the Big Mac, which has 590 calories and 34 grams of fat. Along with the Chicken Fajita Pita and the Chipotle Chicken sandwich (which has 390 calories and 18 grams of fat) Jack in the Box also offers the Chicken Teriyaki Bowl, which has 550 calories and just three grams of fat.

Just remember, your heart is with you for life, feed it right.