

In search of a fast and nutritious lunch

Moving Grays Harbor
By Maryann Welch

My life, and I'm sure many of yours as well, doesn't always allow being at home during meal times so on occasion I find myself in need of a quick bite while shopping or running errands. "Fast food" eateries would seem to be the solution to the "quick" part, but I really questioned whether I could pair that up with "nutritious" as defined by my wish to stick with foods that are low in calories and fat. So, I set out in search of the nutritious and fast lunch. Over the past several months I sought out such at different national-brand restaurants in Grays Harbor. Seven lunches in seven establishments resulted in my personal "fast food" review for your consideration.

The first step in making healthy choices is having nutrition information available and easily accessible. I must say that most all of these chain restaurants deserve applause for compiling the nutrition facts for all of their offerings. The information is provided on both the company web sites and in some written form in the facility. However, locating the information in the facility is not always easy. Only once was the information I needed readily available without a verbal request to the counter staff. And, upon requesting "nutritional information", more often than not the response indicated that not all staff are aware of where to locate it. I did find the exhaustive lists more helpful when in brochure form as opposed to on the back of tray liners.

As I am usually drawn to salads I am happy to report that there are good choices on almost every menu. One of

my long-time favorites is McDonald's Asian Grilled Chicken Salad complete with a low-fat sesame ginger dressing and mandarin orange slices. Some salads still have pitfalls in the form of "crispy" chicken (meaning deep fried) and added cheeses. "Grilled" chicken choices drastically reduce the fat content. The real kicker in ordering a healthy salad is to pay attention to the dressing which can quickly add on both calories and fat. Several establishments have great low-fat options, but I found I could not always count on each business to have the low-fat choices on hand. I even chose to forgo a salad at one such restaurant because no low-fat dressing was available.

I realize that not all of you readers would gravitate so easily to salads. Other offerings that can be served up in a healthful way include pita sandwiches, such as the one Jack in the Box offers, chicken sandwiches, and wraps. Taco Bell offers a new "fresco" menu that has no sour cream or cheeses, which I found to be both healthy and tasty – I'll try that one again. Subway is also a favorite option of mine for the salads and sandwiches I can build myself with wholesome ingredients. Quizno's presents 200 calorie "Flatbread Sammies" in several varieties that are also delicious. Again, limiting sauces (mayonnaise included), cheeses and fried meats will ensure the food is as healthy as possible.

Burgers are not necessarily off-limits, however, any menu item that adds cheese, bacon or additional meat can, in one meal, exceed our daily calorie and fat needs!

Lastly, it's what is added to the main item in a meal that can negate healthy choices. Fries and soda pop are the number one culprits – especially in the large quantities that are offered. When perusing the menu it is many times possible to find a side salad or fruit item that can take the place of fries and there are almost always choices of

non-sweetened ice tea, juices, milk, and, my personal favorite, water, to accompany a meal. If fries and/or soda are an absolute “must”, how about a small order? Making the change to a healthier drink alone can go a long way to improving the nutrition of a “fast food” meal.

In visiting these local businesses I did come to appreciate the efforts that companies are making to increase healthy options. Granted, these establishments are market-driven and I realize that there is a vast customer base for the restaurants I visited. When our local businesses see sales of their healthy menu offerings increase it could just be the incentive they need to develop even more items that will satisfy our desire for “fast” and healthy foods.

I hope this helps you arm yourself with some information to make good nutritional choices for you and your family. Perhaps make a visit to the website of the business you dine at most regularly and plan a healthful meal prior to being confronted with all the choices at the counter. At the very least scan the information available and attempt to make one small healthy change to your “usual”. You just may come up with some nutritious favorites of your own!

Maryann Welch is the recently retired director of Grays Harbor County's Public Health and Social Services Department.

If you have questions about becoming more active or have information about free or low-cost activity in the area, contact the health department at 532-8665 ext. 483, e-mail us at moving@co.grays-harbor.wa.us or visit our web site at www.ghphss.org.