Eating 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.

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

By Jessica Schulman, PhD, MPH, RD
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. 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instead of:</th>
<th>Ask for:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fried</td>
<td>Grilled</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sautéed in butter</td>
<td>Broiled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stir-fried</td>
<td>Steamed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anything with or in butter (or</td>
<td>Poached</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hollandaise, béarnaise)</td>
<td>Baked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basted</td>
<td>Roasted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Au Gratin</td>
<td>Lightly sautéed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escalloped</td>
<td>Lightly stir-fried</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White bread</td>
<td>Whole grain or whole wheat breads,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Breakfast pastries</td>
<td>bagels, cereals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Continental breakfast</td>
<td>Fruit</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yogurt</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oatmeal</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Whole grain breads</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Cereals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beef</td>
<td>Fish</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Shrimp</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lobster</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Poultry</td>
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According to the American Public Health Association, consumers are unaware of the high levels of calories, saturated fat, and sodium in fast-food meals. 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.

### Instead of:  
#### Fast Food and Fast Casual

**Instead of:**  
- Fatty cuts of meat  
  - Rib-eye  
  - Porterhouse  
  - T-bone  

**Ask for:**  
- 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  

**Ask for:**  
- Ketchup  
  - Mustard  
  - Low-fat ranch dressing  
  - Yogurt  
  - Balsamic vinegar  
  - Salsa  
  - Cocktail sauce  
  - Grated Parmesan cheese (1 tsp)

- Soda  
  - Fruit drinks or punch  

**Ask for:**  
- Bottled water with lemon  
  - Diluted highly sweetened drinks (1 part water: 1 part drink)  
  - Unsweetened tea  
  - Flavored waters  
  - Broth

- Creamed soup

**Ask for:**  
- Lemon  
  - Roasted, fresh or powdered garlic  
  - Herbs such as dill, tarragon, cilantro and basil

- Salt  
  - Mixed unspecified seasonings

**Ask for:**  
- Cheese, ice cream, chocolate chip cookies

**Ask for:**  
- 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

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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. 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.

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), 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®

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.

• 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). 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Findings from PCRM’s 2007 report about healthful airport food options</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Chicago O’Hare International Airport</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Los Angeles International Airport</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Newark Liberty International Airport</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Denver International Airport</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport</strong></td>
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<td><strong>San Francisco International Airport</strong></td>
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<td><strong>John F. Kennedy International Airport</strong></td>
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4 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)
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). 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 teethers, 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, 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, peapod.com, 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!

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.”

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.