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Eating Out Increases Daily Calorie Intake

American households spend more than 40 percent of their total food budget on foods prepared outside of the home, up from 25 percent in 1970. Because this marked increase occurred as obesity rates were rising, researchers and policymakers speculate that eating out leads to excess caloric intake and poor diet quality.

Although it is possible to eat healthy away from home, studies have shown that the foods people select when they eat out generally have more calories, fat, and saturated fat than at-home meals and snacks. However, since people with a fondness for fried foods or rich desserts may also be more likely to eat away from home, the relationship between eating out and poorer diet quality may be overstated.

ERS researchers used 2 days of adults' dietary intake data from two national surveys to estimate how changes in the number of meals consumed away from home in a day change the total number of calories consumed and various measures of daily diet quality. They found that food away from home has a significant impact on caloric intake and diet quality. Each additional meal or snack eaten away from home adds an average of 134 calories that day, compared with the same meals or snacks prepared at home. Holding all else constant, one additional meal away from home each week translates to roughly 2 extra pounds each year.

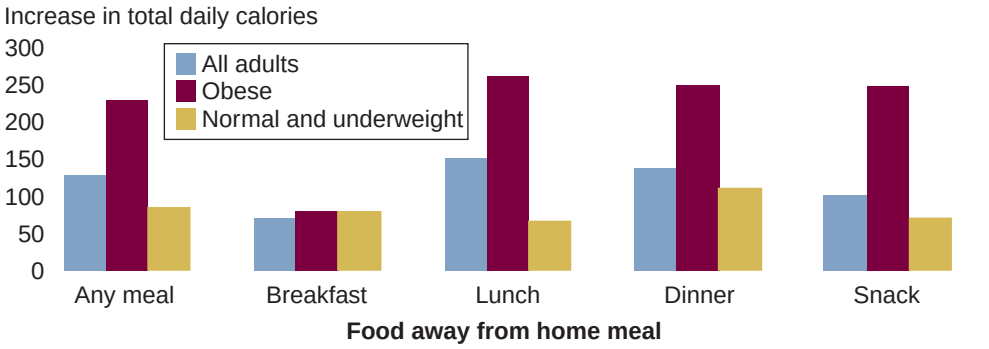
The increase in total daily calories depends on the meal. Eating lunch away from home has the largest impact on the average adult, adding 158 calories to daily intake, compared with lunch prepared at home. Eating dinner out increases intake by 144 calories. Each away-from-home snack adds just over 100 calories to daily intake, compared with snacks prepared at home. Breakfast away from home adds 74 calories.

Eating out increases the percent of daily calories from fat and added sugar. This indicates that individuals do not compensate for the less healthful food-away-from-home meals with more healthful foods at other meals in the day.

The effect of food prepared away from home on daily caloric intake also depends on an individual's weight status. An away-from-home meal adds an average of 239 calories to daily caloric intake for obese individuals (Body Mass Index (BMI) greater than or equal to 30) versus 88 additional calories for those with a BMI less than 25. The only meal for which there was no difference was breakfast. Eating out has similar effects on diet quality for the two weight groups, indicating that the differences in effects on caloric intake of away-from-home foods are more likely due to portion sizes rather than the types of foods consumed.

Rubber Ball

Average caloric effects of food away from home are largest for obese adults



Note: Obese = BMI ≥ 30; normal and underweight = BMI < 25. BMI = Body Mass Index.
Source: USDA, Economic Research Service estimates, using data from the 1994-96 Continuing Survey of Food Intakes by Individuals and the 2003-04 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey.

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This finding is drawn from . . .

The Impact of Food Away From Home on Adult Diet Quality, by Jessica E. Todd, Lisa Mancino, and Biing-Hwan Lin, ERR-90, USDA, Economic Research Service, February 2010, available at: www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err90/

"Separating What We Eat From Where: Measuring the Effect of Food Away From Home on Diet Quality," by Lisa Mancino, Jessica Todd, and Biing-Hwan Lin, *Food Policy*, Vol. 34 (6), December 2009, pp. 557-562.