Garden Variety

A delicious salad can be low in bad fats and calories and high in nutrition—but only if you choose the right greens and garnishes.

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When reputable studies began to show the health benefits of “rabbit food,” salad bars began to spark brisk business, and more and more fast-food chains started introducing salads on their menus.

One such study published in the September 2006 Journal of the American Dietetic Association reports that those who regularly ate salad and raw vegetables also boosted their intake of beneficial nutrients, such as folic acid, vitamins C and E and the antioxidants lycopene and beta-carotene, in the bloodstream.

But, later, when people learned a salad could pack well over 1,000 calories, depending on the ingredients, many went into shock. How could leafy greens rack up such a hefty calorie count?

“Salads are still a very good option for a healthy, delicious one-dish meal, but only if you carefully select the right ingredients,” says nutritionist and weight loss expert JJ Smith, author of *Lose Weight Without Dieting or Working Out*.

Indeed, a healthy salad begins with green, leafy veggies that are low in calories and high in nutrients and fiber. What’s more, when you add quality ingredients such as nuts or chunks of salmon, shrimp or chicken to a salad, you actually get a nice balance of good carbs, healthy fats and lean protein, the three foundation foods for a well-balanced meal.

Although this foundation is sound, people often mistakenly assume a salad is *always* the healthiest choice. A similar misstep: They buy salads (and other meals too) simply because they’re listed under a menu’s “healthy eats” section. This is usually the case with dieters, according to a study in the Journal of Consumer Research. These findings showed dieters are more likely than non-dieters to choose unhealthy food because of the way it’s labeled. This is why salads can be suspect. Some may contain ingredients that are high in calories, sodium and fat. That’s why it’s important to pay attention to your garnishes, and why it’s also crucial to realize that just because something is promoted as being healthy, that doesn’t mean it actually is.

Of course, it is easier to create a healthy salad at home. But when formally dining out or stopping at an eatery for a quick snack, there are simple rules you can use to sidestep a dietary disaster. First, when you order salad in restaurants, avoid chef salads. These contain a lot of calories from animal protein,

such as cheese and ham. And, second, realize Caesar salads, another popular selection, can register 500 or more calories.

In addition, there are easy solutions to keep a salad's calorie count low. Toss steamed, grilled, baked or broiled meats or veggies into your salad, instead of anything fried or breaded. Also, request that dressing be placed on the side. Then, use these tips from Nancy L. Snyderman, MD, author of *Diet Myths That Keep Us Fat*. To avoid calorie overload and satisfy your taste buds, dip your fork into the dressing and spear different salad ingredients. And if a salad is too large, just eat half and save the rest for another meal.

"The good news is, eating salads 'on the go' is very doable now that the majority of restaurants and fast-food eateries carry them," Smith says, then quickly adds one caution. "The one danger of eating fast-food restaurant salads is they commonly contain fried meats, in particular chicken strips."

The reason why fried meats are so bad is because they contain hard-to-digest trans fats that negatively affect weight and health.

But if you think salad may be a tad tasteless without fried meat strips, you've misjudged this versatile meal. "I once read you could find a different salad recipe for all 365 days of the year," Smith says. Although you may not need that many recipes, you can certainly find enough salad varieties to fall in love with salads each and every day of the week.

Smith advises people to get creative and try salad recipes with fruits, nuts, seeds, meats, seasonings and cheeses. This way, boredom is never an issue. And if you're one of the culinary challenged and can't think of interesting ideas for salad combinations, she suggests getting expert help, noting: "Many recipes are available for free on the Web."

Still concerned because you believe a plateful of green leaves won't keep you full? Simply add those previously mentioned lean meats and fiber-rich foods to give your salad sustenance. "Nuts and seeds make you feel full and satisfied longer, and studies show fiber increases fat burning by as much as 30 percent," Smith says.

What won't make you feel any more full and what is considered a big salad no-no is pouring on more dressing. "That just adds fattening ingredients that won't necessarily satisfy your hunger," Smith explains. "The key to making a salad a complete and satisfying meal is to add 'weighty' ingredients."

According to Smith, the top three types of healthy heavyweights to include in a salad should come from the food groups listed below:

Fresh fruit. "Pears, grapes or apples added to a salad provide the right amount of sweetness to satisfy those with a sweet tooth," she says. "Also, fruits are considered 'good carbs.' They provide essential nutrients that give us energy."

Other fruits that make a salad healthier and tastier include berries and mandarin orange slices. Another big bonus? These added ingredients help provide your daily requirement of vegetables and fruits.

Nuts and seeds. "Pistachios, walnuts or almonds add a crisp crunchiness to salads while they also provide healthy fats that are a vital part of the body's survival and balance mechanisms," Smith says. "In

fact, the body's use of fat helps determine the satisfaction level a person receives from food."

If weight is a concern, to get protein benefits without going overboard on fat, just sprinkle nuts, such as pecans and cashews, on your salad. Also, try tasty seeds, such as sunflower and ground flaxseed.

Lean proteins. "In addition to the lean protein from salmon or grilled chicken, beans or hard-boiled eggs make you feel full longer and help prevent overeating and food cravings," Smith says. "Protein also helps you build and maintain muscle mass, and muscle naturally burns more calories than fat."

But back to salad basics. Instead of the much less nutritious iceberg lettuce, pick from baby spinach, arugula, watercress, dandelion greens and red- or green-leaf lettuce. Just one serving of dark greens supplies a day's requirement of vitamin A, more than 3 milligrams of iron and one-third of the daily requirement for folate, as well as calcium and B vitamins, without a load of calories, writes Elizabeth Somer, MA, a registered dietitian, in her book *Eat Your Way to Happiness*.

Once you lay down your favorite leaves, top the salad with delicious veggies, especially colorful ones that are high in nutritious bioflavonoids, natural compounds found in many plants. Some great choices are broccoli, cauliflower, red bell peppers, carrots, kidney and other beans, beets, red onions, avocado, tomatoes, cucumbers and scallions.

Finally, forgo store-bought salad dressings and make your own. It's easy to do. Just mix olive oil and vinegar or lemon or lime juice with fresh or dried herbs and spices. Besides being super tasty, olive oil and raw vegetables are credited with helping you live longer.

So if it's longevity you're after, digest this: A well-designed salad provides vitamins K and C, beta-carotene and minerals such as calcium and iron. This means that in one meal, you can eat a combination of foods that help support the immune system, fight infection, maintain healthy bones and blood, protect against cancer and heart disease, are high in fiber and help improve digestion. Oh, and they're delicious too.

Now, do you have the taste for a salad or what?

How to Keep a Good Salad From Going Bad
Easy: Just watch what you toss on top!

Here's a list of don'ts!

Don't use packaged salad dressings. "These are high in trans fats and artificial ingredients that provide empty calories," says nutritionist JJ Smith. "Just two tablespoons of some salad dressings are about 200 calories per serving. A better alternative is to make your own olive oil–based salad dressing with garlic and lemons, which is lower in fat per serving."

Don't trust reduced-calorie salad dressings. Check the calorie count and be sure not to drown your salad in dressing simply because you think it has fewer calories.

Don't drench salads with mayonnaise. This includes cole slaw, macaroni, potato and seafood salads. Use fat-free mayonnaise and don't overdo it with the creamy white stuff.

Don’t trust packaged salads that already have salad dressing added. If it looks like it’s drenched in oil, either don’t buy it or make sure you drain off the oil.

Don’t get carried away with croutons. “These cubes of crunchy white bread have little to no nutritional value,” Smith warns. “During the process [of making] white bread, the two most nutritious parts of the wheat—the bran and the germ—are removed. A better alternative to add crunchiness to a salad is to use nuts and seeds, which are high in fiber and promote healthy digestion.”

Don’t smother greens with cheese. “Many cheeses, such as American cheese, are highly processed, with unnatural flavorings that aren’t healthy,” Smith says. “Try natural cheeses, such as Parmesan, feta, blue cheese or even vegetarian cheeses.”

Don’t add salt. Instead, use herbs, spices and lemon juice.

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