

Fast food versus fast casual—which has more calories?

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(HealthDay)—Fast-food restaurants get a bad rap for menus chockful of high-fat, high-salt foods with little nutrition. But are fast casual and sit-down chains better? The answer may surprise you.

A University of South Carolina study looked at the calories in lunch and dinner entrees and found that fast-casual dishes had, on average, 200 more calories than fast-food ones—760 compared to 560. Menus at fast-casual restaurants also have more high-calorie options to tempt you. But the study didn't look at whether these higher calorie choices are healthier. For instance, a whole-wheat roll might have more calories than a [fast-food](#) white burger bun, but it could also have more nutrients.

Researchers at Drexel University and the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia focused on both nutrients and calories of 2,600 menu items served at local full-service [restaurant](#) chains. They found that choices in general were high in saturated fat and sodium, not to mention calories. Almost one-third of the entrees had more salt than

you should eat in an entire day. Only one-fifth had the minimum amount of all-important fiber.

Another concern raised by this study centered on the symbols restaurants use to label some dishes as "healthy." Since there are no national guidelines that restaurants must follow in order to put a generic heart, for example, next to a [menu](#) item, it can be hard to know what makes one [dish](#) healthier than another. So always ask questions about preparation to find out how many calories and how much salt and fat are used in dishes you're considering.

Even better, look for nutritional information on the chain's website before you go. When portions are obviously large, remember the easy way to keep [calories](#) in check: Eat half and take the rest home.

More information: The National Center for Health Research has a chart showing calorie differences of popular menu items [from many national chains](#).

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