

Lunch can be a daily dietary black hole, one that we often fill with fast food, huge portions or (worse) nothing at all. A healthy lunch sets you up for a high-energy afternoon and curtails evening bingeing, but a skimpy or fatty pick can wreck your mood and bring on cravings. Our guide to a good lunch will help you be healthier, happier and slimmer.

Customize your midday meal

A SELF survey found that lunch leaves most women hungry again in a few hours. Here's what to eat if...

You're tied to your desk for the afternoon.

Best choice Dark, leafy greens with grilled steak, red peppers, broccoli and orange slices, topped with vinaigrette. Any lunch should provide 400 to 500 calories (probably more than you eat now), made up of 30 percent protein (4 to 5 ounces of fish, lean meat or tofu), 50 percent complex carbs (whole grains, veggies and fruit) and 20 percent healthy fats (olive oil and nuts).

The reason When you know you're going to be inactive for the next several hours, try to eat fewer bread-based carbs, says Lisa Young, Ph.D., author of *The Portion Teller Plan* (Broadway Books). The vitamin C in the vegetables and fruit will help your body absorb more energizing iron from the beef.

You're giving a presentation late in the day.

Best choice Grilled or baked wild salmon, a medium sweet potato and spinach sautéed with olive oil will help your brain stay sharp, Young says.

The reason The omega-3 fatty acids found in salmon can contribute to an upbeat mood, Young says. And spinach offers folate—a B vitamin that may improve your memory—while the fiber-packed sweet potato will stabilize your blood sugar level to clear your head and stave off end-of-day hunger.

You're headed to Spinning after work.

Best choice One cup of whole-wheat penne with 4 oz grilled chicken breast, tomato sauce, a sprinkle of Parmesan, broccoli and sliced zucchini

The reason The protein in the chicken will keep energy humming and allow your muscles to store much-needed glycogen from the pasta to fuel your cardio efforts, says Carrie Wiatt, a private nutritionist in Los Angeles. Slow-burning carbs leave you feeling full, while veggies add vitamins and fiber.

Your evening will include cocktails and cake.

Best choice A stir-fry starring shrimp, pea pods, onions, mushrooms, ½ cup soba noodles and half an ounce of sliced almonds (about 5 nuts)

The reason If you know you'll be tempted later, a light, filling lunch is a crucial defense. Shrimp is low in saturated fat and calories but high in protein, and almonds deliver heart-healthy monounsaturated fat that will help you feel satisfied for hours, Wiatt says. Pea pods and mushrooms offer a gratifying crunch, and soba noodles add complex carbs and extra protein.

27% of women admit to skipping lunch because they're too busy.

Editors confess: what we ate today



KRISTEN MULVIHILL

“Crudités with blue cheese dressing, one cup of chicken salad and a large black-and-white cookie”

IS IT HEALTHY? “This is a dangerous lunch—it’s small but high in fat and calories,” says SELF contributing editor Janis Jibrin, R.D. (Estimated total: 1,050 calories and 68 grams of fat.) “She’s got to decide where to spend her fat—on the dressing, the chicken or the cookie. Make that half a cookie! She can’t get away with all three.”



SHEILA MONAGHAN

“I had lowfat yogurt, fruit and granola.”

IS IT HEALTHY? “Yogurt is a great choice, especially if it’s plain yogurt—one cup has nearly half the calcium she needs daily. Granola is a little caloric, but she could use the calories because the rest of her meal is light (with it, she’s eating about 460 calories). Pick a granola that contains nuts and less than 10 grams of sugar per 250 calories.”



CATHERINE RYAN

“I had a turkey burger with french fries and a Diet Coke. I felt a little sick after.”

IS IT HEALTHY? “Turkey burgers can be lower in fat and calories than beef ones, but it depends on whether they’re fried or not,” Jibrin says. This meal probably racked up 700 calories. “The big problem is the fries; one serving can have 16 fat grams! Fat can slow your digestion down too much, which makes you feel heavy and tired all afternoon.”



Laura Kalehoff

“I devoured a pastrami and Swiss sandwich on rye with mesclun greens and an apple.”

IS IT HEALTHY? “Could be worse,” Jibrin says. “Pastrami packs a lot of sodium (743 milligrams, or about half your daily limit) but only 125 calories and 5 g fat for 3 oz. It’s the cheese she has to worry about: Ask for one slice. Whole-grain bread would have added more fiber, but the salad and apple help make up for it.”

SELF

a long way in terms of both taste and nutrition," Gans points out. One tablespoon delivers almost

Does your lunch need a lift



bar

checklist from

ories. "Walnuts 3s, but they are ys. Crush three e over salad.

dressings such as h, ranch or blue ns can contain

grams of fat. "The truth is that most women can eat as big a salad as they want," Gans says. "It's the dressing that's the problem."

TOP IT Oil-based salad dressings (or use straight olive oil and vinegar). Sprinkle, don't douse: Aim for 2 tablespoons if the dressing is lowfat; pour if it contains oil.

ADD VEGGIES Anything that's been brushed with fat, you must have them, take them on and toss with fresh lowfat dressing. You'll get minimal fat.

AVOID SWEETS Despite their sweet-taste, often-overlooked veggies have no sugar added. They're low fat and lots of flavor.

Lighten up a working lunch

ORDER IN ADVANCE

If your coworkers all get burgers, it's easy to mindlessly do the same. Check the menu ahead of time, and pick a light, flavorful dish (such as veggie chili or chicken fajitas), suggests Mary Tabacchi, Ph.D., professor of nutrition at the School of Hotel Administration at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York.

BE A LITTLE PICKY

Don't let a catered lunch throw you. Keep portions in mind (protein the size of your palm; starch the size of your fist), and peel the skin off chicken or fish and eat the meat.

The coolest heat-and-eat meals

"Frozen entrées are fine once or twice a week," Young says. Look for low-sodium options with less than 4 g saturated fat, 3 to 5 g fiber and 300 to 400 calories per serving (supplement those under 400 calories with yogurt or skim milk and fruit). Or eat what we liked.

THE DISH	THE BENEFITS	THE FACTS
ANNIE CHUN'S SPROUTED BROWN RICE SUSHI WRAPS	In minutes, this kit transforms whatever's in your fridge—chopped veggies, tofu, last night's leftovers—into 10 pieces of sushi. Use half of the soy sauce for less sodium.	300 calories (per 10 pieces sans filling), 1 g fat (0 g saturated), 60 g carbs, 4 g fiber, 8 g protein, 920 mg sodium
KASHI LIME CILANTRO SHRIMP	This tasty, nutty pilaf includes oats, brown rice, barley and winter wheat. The shrimp tastes fresh, plus the veggies contribute 120 percent of your daily vitamin A requirement.	250 calories, 8 grams fat (2 g saturated), 33 g carbs, 6 g fiber, 12 g protein, 760 mg sodium
SMART ONES CRANBERRY TURKEY MEDALLIONS WITH STUFFING	True Thanksgiving flavors, minus most of the saturated fat. The turkey is tender, and even the stuffing tastes like the real thing. And green beans and carrots add fiber.	350 calories, 4.5 g fat (1 g saturated), 59 g carbs, 4 g fiber, 18 g protein, 560 g sodium
HEALTHY CHOICE SMOKEHOUSE APPLE AND CHICKEN PANINI	This bread miraculously tastes "toasted," even after being nuked, and is as satisfying as a sandwich. The lowfat cheese fulfills 25 percent of your daily calcium needs.	310 calories, 4 g fat (1.5 g saturated), 44 g carbs, 5 g fiber, 23 g protein, 600 mg sodium
TASTE ABOVE TUSCAN MARINARA SAUCE WITH VEGGIE CHICKEN AND PENNE PASTA	Even though it's vegetarian, this meal manages to provide more protein and iron than many meat-based offerings. It also has less sodium than any of the meals we tested.	320 calories, 19 g fat (2 g saturated), 22 g carbs, 8 g fiber, 26 g protein, 300 mg sodium