

Enjoy Food Dates Without Wrecking Your Diet

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Try these tips to make those romantic food dates less fattening.

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Many romantic dates involve gazing lovingly across the table at your sweetheart as you both enjoy a fabulous meal. But while these food dates may be great for your love life, they can wreak havoc on your waistline. Is it possible to stay on track with healthy eating goals, and still have a spectacular time on date night? Experts say there are things you can do to not only survive food dates, but thrive on the them.

Romance Takes Time

One of the things working in your favor on a food date is time. Eating tends to go more slowly when you're sharing a candlelit dinner. There is sweet conversation, hand-kissing, foot-fondling, etc. ... all of which takes time.

Eating slowly is a good thing for weight control. It takes 20 minutes for your stomach to tell your brain that it is no longer hungry but is comfortable. If you eat quickly, you might be eating past "comfortable," because you haven't given your stomach a chance to communicate to your brain. Enjoying a romantic dinner in courses -- be it at home or in a restaurant -- helps slow down the eating process, too. Just make sure to have small portions of each course.

Deprivation Is Not on the Menu

Have you ever barely eaten during the day to fit into fancy clothes for a special evening out? Or have you barely eaten during the day to "bank" those calories for later on, when you'll be enjoying a food date in a fabulous restaurant?

According to Jennifer L. Derenne, MD, a staff psychiatrist at Massachusetts General Hospital, this type of restricting often encourages overeating, and can leave you feeling physically uncomfortable and emotionally stressed. "The best strategy for special occasion meals is to continue to eat a reasonable, healthy diet in the days leading to the event," says Derenne. "Once there, order foods that you enjoy -- including dessert!" Derenne believes that if you aren't famished when you sit down to a special meal, the chances are better that you'll enjoy reasonable-sized portions.

How to Resist Pressure to Overeat

Perhaps you and your sweetheart have a history of overeating together? Maybe this is a rut you have found yourself in because your partner likes to eat big restaurant meals, and misery loves company. But that was then. *Now*, you're trying to shed some extra pounds (or maintain lost weight) and live a healthy lifestyle.

Jean Kristeller, PhD, a researcher on mindful eating at Indiana State University, says one good way to resist pressure to overeat is to stay aware of your own feelings of hunger and fullness -- and to share them with your partner. Moaning about being on a diet or saying, "I really want that but I shouldn't," are just invitations to be persuaded to eat more, says Kristeller. Instead, she suggests saying things like, "Oh, that was really good, but I'm not hungry anymore," or "I'm too full to finish it, but let's take it home."

If you're very comfortable with your date, **Lisa Young, PhD, RD**, author of *The Portion Teller Plan* and a nutrition professor at New York University, suggests saying, "I love being able to wear my (insert a favorite item of clothing) that you like so much, and overeating is just not worth the calories!"

If it's a more formal food date, **Young** believes it's best not to dwell on the issue. She suggests simply saying, "This meal has been so delicious. I'm happy and completely satisfied."

Share More Than Your Heart

One of the easiest ways to make a food date easier on your diet sure is to split your entrée with your sweetheart, especially if you're in a restaurant that serves mammoth portions. You can both enjoy a nice cup of soup or side of salad, and a bite of bread with that addicting dipping oil -- just split the entrée. This isn't going to work for every couple -- like when one member of the pair is a big meat eater and the other prefers vegetarian dishes. But it just might be the ticket for many.

Don't Drink Your Calories

You want to make sure you have plenty of calories to spend on the food during your date, so choose low- or no-calorie drinks. Try unsweetened iced tea, hot tea, coffee, club soda with lemon or lime, diet soft drinks, or mineral water. If you must, have only one glass of wine -- or a wine spritzer. Just enjoying two glasses (6 ounces each) of wine will add up to 250 calories.

The Dessert Doggy Bag

Restaurant desserts can be oh-so-tempting. But it may help to keep in mind that your after-dinner romantic activities will be much more pleasing if your stomach is comfortable, not full. By ordering a mutually agreed upon dessert "to go," the two of you will have a special something to share much later in the evening when your hunger resurfaces. Not only that, but you'll still get to try of few bites of that mesmerizing treat that caught your eye when the dessert tray passed by.

One Meal Won't Matter, Right?

But come on, you say: One super-rich, greasy, or creamy meal isn't going to harm your health, right? Research from Australia and Sweden says "wrong!" The researchers fed a meal that was high in either saturated fat or polyunsaturated fat meal on two separate occasions to 14 healthy men and women. (A high-saturated-fat meal is typical of a special restaurant dinner). The researchers found that several hours after the high-saturated fat meal, there was a decrease in the ability of the study subjects' "good" (HDL) cholesterol to act as an anti-inflammatory agent and to help arteries relax (which allows for better blood flow). But the anti-inflammatory action of HDLs *improved* after the subjects ate polyunsaturated fat. So avoiding restaurant meals high in saturated fat is definitely a good idea -- whether you're trying to lose weight or not.

Don't Check in to Heartburn Hotel

For the 10% of the population who experience heartburn and reflux daily, a romantic dinner out can lead to pain instead of love and laughter. According to Anthony A. Starpoli, MD, director of the Gastrointestinal Reflux (GERD) Unit at St. Vincent's Hospital in New York, the biggest mistake people make is eating large meals when they dine out. Large meals, even when a person is of normal weight, can physically put pressure on the stomach. And when there is pressure on the stomach, stomach acid has a better chance of splashing up into the esophagus (causing heartburn).

If you have acid reflux and you want to enjoy your food date and après-dinner activities, besides not overeating, Starpoli suggests: Pacing yourself and giving your stomach time to empty. Avoiding fatty and rich foods. Limiting alcohol. Continuing to take your acid reflux medications if you take them.

And as tempting as it might be to strap on your snuggest outfit for the big night out -- don't, Starpoli suggests in an email interview. Tight-fitting clothing may increase abdominal pressure and worsen your reflux, he says.

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SOURCES: Nicholls S.J., et al., *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*. 2006, 48: pp 715-720. Jean L. Kristeller, PhD, professor of psychology, Indiana State University; board member, Center for Mindful Eating. **Lisa R. Young, PhD, RD, professor of nutrition, New York University; author, *The Portion Teller Plan*.** Anthony A. Starpoli, MD, director, GERD Unit, St. Vincent's Hospital and Medical Center, New York. Jennifer L. Derenne, MD, staff psychiatrist, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston.

