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Diet busters

Before you reward yourself for eating healthy, take a closer look at what you're consuming

By Crystal Yednak
For RedEye

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Like many Chicagoans, Christy Zaide, 27, vowed to start the new year off right, by joining a gym and paying more attention to what she eats.

Given a choice between a turkey burger and a regular burger, the Humboldt Park resident said she definitely would order the turkey version. "I've always thought that turkey is just generally a healthy food," Zaide said.

That may not always be the case. Depending on the type of turkey meat used, a turkey burger sometimes can pack as many calories and fat as a burger made from beef, local nutritionists say.

What many well-meaning dieters don't realize is that some of their go-to weight-loss foods actually might be hampering their efforts, the nutritionists told RedEye. Turkey and other foods that are assumed to be diet-safe, such as tuna salad or bran muffins, enjoy what nutritionists call a "health halo," according to Dawn Jackson Blatner, a registered and licensed dietitian and spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association.

A news report will indicate that an item, such as turkey, is good for you, Blatner said, and people will eat it in any shape or form, thinking it will help them shave off pounds. The claims sometimes can be true, they are not always.

"Many times my clients are surprised to hear some of their favorites foods that they've been eating with abandon, thinking they're good for them, are maybe sabotaging their attempts at weight loss," said Christine Palumbo, a registered dietitian who also is on the board of directors of the American Dietetic Association.

Here, Palumbo, Blatner and other nutritionists address some common diet blunders and offer more diet-friendly options.

BRAN MUFFIN

Yes, high-fiber foods such as bran are good for you, but not when hidden beneath layers of butter and sugar. Consider this: A raisin bran muffin at Au Bon Pain packs 410 calories and 9 grams of fat, according to Au Bon Pain's Web site.

The dieter's solution: Bran cereal. It's fast, filling--and low in calories. For example, a half-cup serving of All-Bran cereal has just 80 calories and 1 gram of fat, according to nutritional info on the box.

SALADS

"People tend to undo the goodness of a salad by dousing it with high-fat toppings such as cheese or croutons," said Mindy Hahn, a licensed dietitian and nutritionist. Add-ons such as cheese, dried fruit, nuts or croutons can make a salad just as bad calorie-wise as some fast food, she said. But the biggest offender can be the salad dressing. For example, 2 tablespoons of Marie's Creamy Ranch has 170 calories and 19 grams of fat.

The dieter's solution: Try using just one fattier add-on. Consider low-fat dressings or a squeeze of lemon. And when it comes to full-fat dressings, nutritionists suggest employing the "dipping method": Order the dressing on the side, dip your fork into the dressing, then into the salad. You'll get the flavor with fewer calories.

TUNA SALAD

"People think any way, shape or form you're eating fish is good for you," Blatner said. That's not the case when it's "deep fried in a patty at a fast-food place or swimming in a sea of mayonnaise," she said.

Palumbo agreed, adding that restaurant-made tuna salad can be especially diet-derailing. For example, a tuna salad sandwich on whole-grain bread at Panera Bread has 840 calories and 44 grams of fat, according to the nutritional info on Panera's Web site. A Big Mac, by comparison, has 540 calories and 29 grams of fat, according to McDonald's.

The dieter's solution: Palumbo suggests making your tuna salad sandwich at home on whole-wheat bread with a half-cup of water-packed tuna, celery, onion and 1 tablespoon of reduced-fat mayo. It can add up to as little as 260 calories, she said.

GRANOLA

Some granolas can contain a surprising amount of added sugar and fat, which gives many granolas their crunch, dietitian Blatner said. But a common problem has to do with portion size. A portion of granola may contain about 210 calories for a half-cup serving, but most people pour about a two-cup portion (800 calories or more), making it a gut-buster, Palumbo said.

The dieter's solution: Granola bars deliver the granola taste in a portion-controlled amount, Blatner said. However, watch for additives such as high fructose corn syrup that can drive up the calorie count.

TURKEY BURGERS

"You can get lean beef burgers that are lower in calories and fat than a turkey burger," Blatner said. The percentage of fat in the meat is what matters. A package of beef that is 95-percent lean can be better than some higher-fat ground turkey.

The dieter's solution: Make sure you're buying extra-lean ground turkey. [c.y.]

FRUIT SMOOTHIES

"Many times people will work out, then grab a fruit smoothie at the health club. You can very easily negate the calories you've just burned," Palumbo said. At Jamba Juice, the regular 16-ounce sizes can add up to about 200-300 calories; the "power" size (30 ounces) weighs in at 500-600 calories, according to nutritional info on Jamba Juice's Web site.

Sweet juice bases such as the ones commonly used at smoothie bars can add a lot of calories without offering much nutrition, Hahn said. Also, research shows that your brain doesn't register drinks, which means you'll still feel hungry after downing tons of calories, Hahn added.

The dieter's solution: Eat a piece of whole fruit, like an apple. The fiber and bulk offers more nutrition and will keep you fuller longer. Or, if you really want a smoothie, make it at home, where you can control the calories. Hahn suggests using antioxidant-rich frozen berries as the base and adding water or non-fat milk and a scoop of protein powder.