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Be Savvy About Building a Healthy Entree Salad

by Kim Pierce

(Dallas Morning News) During summer's hottest days, a salad for dinner sounds healthy, cool and inviting. But, too often, we give ourselves a pass on calories, loading up with all manner of toppings and trimmings. Because it's just a salad, after all.

Like all things that sound too good to be true, the just-a-salad myth is, too. Salad toppings, especially those at salad bars, easily can turn a light summer entree into a chow-down that rivals a cheeseburger for fat and calories. But it is possible to build a better salad and indulge a bit, too.



Our strategy is simple: It's called "red light, green light, yellow light." Fill your salad bowl with as much as you want of the green-light items. These include greens and most vegetables and fruits. Use a bit of caution with yellow-light items, which may be good nutrition values but are higher in fat, such as salmon, avocado and nuts.

Finally, red-light items, which can be weak nutrition values, should be like wild cards that you play sparingly and strategically for flavor spikes or crunch. These include bacon bits, most cheeses and ready-made concoctions such as tuna salad and pasta salad.

Add protein to make it an entree: 4 to 6 ounces is plenty. Read on for the particulars, from nutritional tips to the scoop on dressings.

GREEN LIGHT Go, go, go

Use as much as you want of these nutrient-dense ingredients:

Apples, Artichoke hearts (not in oil), Beans, Beets, Bell peppers, Berries, Broccoli, Cabbage, Cantaloupe, Carrots, Cauliflower, Celery, Corn, Cucumber, Ginger (pickled), Green beans (cooked), Greens (the darker, the better: arugula, watercress, romaine, butter lettuce, spinach, red and green leaf lettuce), Herbs (snipped), Honeydew, Mango, Mushrooms, Onions, Papaya, Peas, Pears, Radishes, Raisins, Red peppers (roasted), Snow peas, Sprouts, Sugar-snap peas, Tomatoes, Water chestnuts, Watermelon

YELLOW LIGHT

Proceed with caution

Add only moderate amounts of these. They're nutrient-dense but high in fat, although it's good fat. A few have other nutrition issues, such as high sodium.

Almonds, Artichoke hearts (marinated in oil), Avocado, Capers, Croutons, Goat or sheep's milk cheeses, Hummus, Olives (kalamata and others), Peanuts, Pepitas, Pine nuts, Sardines, Sesame seeds, Soy nuts, Sunflower seeds, Walnuts

RED LIGHT

Put on the brakes

Use these sparingly because they quickly add excess calories and fat.

Bacon, Most cheeses (including blue, cheddar, Parmesan and Monterey Jack), Chicken salad, Egg salad, Meats (processed), Pasta salad, Tortilla strips (fried), Tuna salad

SOURCES: USDA National Nutrient Database for Standard Reference; calorie-count.com; product labels

NOT ALL PROTEIN IS CREATED EQUAL

Here's a snapshot of common add-in proteins:

Grilled salmon: High in fat, but it's the good kind we don't get enough of, omega-3 fatty acids.

White-meat, skinless chicken or turkey: Lean and packed with nutrients.

Grilled steak: High in iron, but also high in saturated fat, which can raise blood cholesterol. If you use it, keep portions small.

Hard-cooked eggs: High in cholesterol, but this doesn't translate to higher blood cholesterol the way saturated fat does. Still, add in moderation.

Tofu: Rich in protein, low in fat, also high in iron and healthy isoflavones.

Shrimp or crab: Lean and rich in protein.

Three salads, deconstructed

Here are three entree salads and how they stack up as part of a 2,000-calorie diet. Unlike the Wedge, each is meant to be a complete meal for one that balances good nutrition with great taste. Notice how the dressing kicks up the calories.

ASIAN SALMON SALAD

Calories Ingredient

4 Watercress, 1 cup
15 Frisée, 2 cups
26 Sugar-snap peas, 1/2 cup
12 Red bell pepper, 1/2 cup, julienned
54 Mango, 1/2 cup chopped
309 Teriyaki salmon, 6 ounces
60 Sesame seeds, 2 tablespoons
2 Snipped chives, 2 tablespoons
40 Pickled ginger, 2 tablespoons
225 Brianna's Ginger-Mandarin Dressing, 3 tablespoons
747 Total calories

MEDITERRANEAN SHRIMP SALAD

Calories Ingredient

30 Baby spinach, 3 cups
16 Tomato, 1/2 chopped
12 Cucumber, 1/2 medium sliced

100 Kalamata olives, 1/4 cup, sliced
70 Feta cheese, reduced fat, 1/4 cup crumbled
171 Roasted pine nuts, 3 tablespoons
35 Shrimp, 5 medium
240 Brianna's Blush Dressing, 1/4 cup
674 Total calories

HEARTY AMERICAN SALAD

Calories Ingredient

231 Smoked, skinless white-meat chicken (barbecue takeout), 1 cup
24 Romaine lettuce, 3 cups
14 Red onion rings, roasted, 1/8 cup
67 Corn, 1/2 cup
12 Roasted red peppers, julienned, 1/2 cup
114 Avocado, 1/2 chopped
49 Pepitas, 2 teaspoons
108 Jalapeño-Ranch Dressing, 1/4 cup
619 Total calories

Jalapeño-Ranch Dressing: Combine 1/2 cup Kraft Light Done Right Ranch Dressing and 1/4 cup store-bought salsa. We used Central Market's. Makes 3/4 cup.

CAVEAT EMPTOR: REDUCED-FAT DRESSING

When you reach for reduced-fat dressing, look at the ingredient list. In many cases, you're trading the fat for high-fructose corn syrup, more salt and other less-than-optimally nutritious fillers.

Example: The first ingredient in the Kraft Light Done Right Thousand Island is HFCS, and the sugar count is 7 grams per 2 tablespoon serving with a hefty dose of sodium, 340 milligrams or 14 percent of the daily value. On the plus side: There are no trans or saturated fats. It's a good illustration of the tradeoff you sometimes make with less fat. I like the Light Done Right line.

The Spritzer option: Wish-Bone Spritzers don't contain less fat, but they do make it easy to use less of the product. I especially like Red Wine Mist, but they come in other flavors, such as Balsamic Breeze and Asian Silk. The Spritzers get 100 percent of their calories from fat, but the spritz system allows you to use considerably less than a standard 2 tablespoon serving. Here again, the sodium is on the high side: 130 milligrams or 5 percent of the daily value in 10 spritzes. Still, if you're looking to trim fat and keep flavor, it's a good option.

THE WEDGE

Ever wonder why it's so filling? Just count the calories. A restaurant wedge serving contains roughly the same number of calories as a Big Mac, almost all of it fat.

Calories Ingredient

26 1/4 large head iceberg lettuce
304 1/2 cup blue cheese dressing
100 1 ounce blue cheese, crumbled
129 3 strips bacon, crumbled
559 Total
540 One Big Mac

RESTAURANT SALADS

Some restaurants make you work to find accurate calorie and fat totals. For example, McDonald's Web site doesn't make clear whether the 380 calories listed for its Asian Salad with Crispy Chicken includes the dressing.

Dressing is a minefield of calories in some salads. Romano's Macaroni Grill Chicken Caesar contains 920 calories, according to the Web site. But the dressing accounts for 458 of the total.

Sodium is also problematic. Romano's Macaroni Grill Chicken Florentine Salad includes 5,460 milligrams of sodium, more than twice the daily value of 2,400. Many others are around 1,500.

Here are calorie (and fat-gram) counts for popular restaurant entree salads:

480 Chick-fil-A Chicken Caesar Cool Wrap (16 grams fat)
520 Wendy's Mandarin Chicken Salad (25 grams)
520 Panera Greek Salad (48 grams)
592 Greenz Chipotle Chicken Salad (55 grams)
920 Romano's Macaroni Grill Chicken Caesar (69 grams)
1,010 Chili's Caesar Chicken With Caesar Dressing (76 grams)

WAYS TO PERK UP SALADS

Cut veggies or fruit in interesting ways: A carrot, for example, can be cut into coins, flowers or ribbons, or julienned.

Serve as a wrap in a flour tortilla (try whole-wheat) for a grab-and-go option.

Add color to salads with red and orange bell peppers, tomatoes, purple cabbage, carrots, strawberries, raspberries, mango, papaya, watermelon.

Add crunch with jicama, fennel, celery, nuts, tortilla strips or chips.

Add fruit such as strawberries, mango, blueberries, blackberries, watermelon, apples and pears for a sweet dimension.

OUTSOURCING YOUR PROTEIN

Eatzi's, Central Market, Market Street, Whole Foods, Dallas City Market and Urban Market all have chef's cases and more with great salad protein options, from sliced steak to Cajun shrimp.

Pick up smoked chicken from your favorite barbecue joint.

Use roast chicken from a supermarket.

Check out the fully cooked marinated tuna or salmon in pouches, such as Chicken of the Sea Salmon Steak in Honey-Barbecue or Mandarin-Orange Glaze, or StarKist marinated tuna fillets or Sweet & Spicy chunk light tuna. While not as tasty as fresh, they're an easy, last-minute addition from the pantry.

For an indulgence, try the fried chicken tenders at Bubba's. Note: If you pick a high-calorie item like this, keep the rest of the salad lean and use a reduced-fat dressing.

Get mini crab cakes, grilled salmon or other ready-to-eat seafood from Rex's Seafood Market on Lovers Lane west of Inwood, at TJ's Fresh Seafood Market in the southwest corner of Forest at Preston, or at Sea Breeze Fish Market and Grill on Preston between Spring Creek and Parker in Plano.

