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The fast casual conundrum: Fast casual restaurant entrées higher in calories than fast food

Dieters looking to cut calories may believe it's best to pick a fast casual restaurant over a fast food chain, but new research from the University of South Carolina shows that may not be the best choice.

According to researchers from the Arnold School of Public Health, entrées at fast casual restaurants -- a category that includes restaurants such as Chipotle and Panera Bread -- have a higher average calorie count than fast food establishments, such as a McDonald's or Bojangles.

In [research](#) released May 11 in the Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, researchers Danielle Schoffman, Brie Turner-McGrievy and others showed that an average meal at a fast casual restaurant is 200 calories higher than a typical fast food meal. The fast casual restaurants also have more high-calorie options on their menus than the fast food restaurants.

The researchers analyzed the menus at 34 fast food and 28 fast casual restaurants, finding that fast food entrees had an average of 760 calories per entrée compared to 561 for fast food entrées. Also, a greater proportion of fast casual restaurant entrees exceeded the median of 640 calories per entrée. Because there are so many ways to customize meals at both restaurants, the researchers counted the calories of what is considered a standard order. For example, with salads they used ranch dressing because it is the most popular.

"We were surprised that there were higher calories at fast casual restaurants, but one of the main takeaways from the paper is that there are a lot of high-calorie options at both kinds of restaurants," said Schoffman, the lead researcher.

The researchers did not look at nutritional profiles or any other source of food value beyond calorie count. The idea for the study originated because of questions Schoffman heard as she worked on her dissertation research study where she encouraged families to reduce their fast food consumption. She kept being asked, "Does Chipotle or Panera count as fast food?"

Intuitively, the research team said it thought fast casual meals would not be as high calorie as fast food, but there was little research available on the topic.

“There has been such growth in this fast casual industry,” Turner-McGrievy said. “We wanted to see if these fast casual restaurants would be a better choice for people who are watching their calorie intake. Are people who are looking to lose weight and cut calories better off going to Chipotle or Burger King?”

The researchers hope further studies will look at topics including nutritional values and other health benefits of certain foods. It’s possible, for example, that fast casual restaurants may have higher diet quality, less sodium or more fiber.

“A burger on a white bun may have fewer calories, but when you’re talking about cancer prevention or other chronic diseases, you have to look beyond calories,” Turner-McGrievy said. “We don’t want the message to be, ‘Go eat hamburgers and don’t eat guacamole and beans and brown rice.’ ”