

Healthier Airport Food

Your best food choices when you're stuck at the airport.

By [Elaine Magee, RD, MPH](#)

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Reviewed by [Kathleen M. Zelman, LD, RD, MPH](#)

"Hurry up and wait" is the phrase that seems to sum up air travel these days. You hurry to get to your airport two hours before your flight. You wait to get through the security check before hurrying to your gate. You wait to board your plane, then wait again to arrive at your destination. And what about food? If you're not already hungry and thirsty by the time you get on the plane, you're likely to be hungry and thirsty by the time your flight is over.

Many airlines no longer offer meals except on longer flights. And it's not so simple to bring food to the airport these days. You used to be able to bring your own yogurt and fruit juice, and to pack frozen water bottles to keep your food cool. But for security reasons, you can now bring only mostly dry goods. All liquids must be purchased at the gates.

So how does a health-conscious traveler negotiate the food offerings at airports across America?

The good news is that in many airports, the prepared food choices are getting fresher and healthier. It isn't just about French fries and doughnuts anymore! In lots of airports, you can now find everything from salad and sushi bars to smoothie stands and fresh Tex-Mex grill restaurants.

Armed with some key food items from home, and healthier options available for purchase at the airport, you'll be a happier and healthier (or at least less hungry) traveler this summer. Just follow these four healthy traveler rules:

Healthy Traveler Rule No. 1: Bring Your Own Snacks

The only way to know for sure that you'll have snacks that suit your body and appetite is to bring your own. Christine Gerbstadt, MD, RD, spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association, suggests bringing protein-rich snacks and "packable" fruits like apples, oranges, and dried fruit.

"I like soy nuts, and some of the protein bars are good in a pinch," adds Gerbstadt.

She suggests choosing unsalted nuts and snacks to reduce bloating and dehydration while flying. Drinking a full bottle of water, especially when eating protein bars, will help with digestion and hydration, Gerbstadt says.

Lisa Young, PhD, RD, nutrition professor at New York University and author of *The Portion Teller Plan*, adds cut-up veggies and rice cakes with peanut butter to the list of healthy snacks to pack.

Keep in mind that most airports no longer let you bring anything liquid or gel-like through security, including water bottles and yogurt. But you can purchase these items (usually for an inflated price) on the other side of the security checkpoint on your way to the gate.

Healthy Traveler Rule No. 2: Know the Healthier Airport Options

Whether you're at a magazine and snack stand, a deli, or a fast-food restaurant, there are healthier food choices to be made inside the airport. For starters, trade in that bottle of soda for a bottle of water, and buy a bag of pretzels or mixed nuts instead of chips, Young advises in an email interview.

If you need a meal, don't settle for the first fast-food restaurant you see. Walk around the food area to size up all your options before making your choice. Gerbstadt suggests ordering a side of sushi -- but without the high-sodium soy sauce.

Here are some better choices in typical airport eateries:

Pizza. In the pizza line, grab a slice with veggie toppings, and pair it with fresh fruit or raw veggies, not chips or a cookie. The pizza is rich enough. You'll want to balance it with something high-fiber and low in fat.

Sandwich/Salad. When selecting a premade sandwich, look for whole-wheat or whole-grain bread, choose lean meat or vegetarian fillings, and dress it with no-calorie condiments like mustard. For salads, if light dressing isn't available, use just 1 tablespoon of the regular type. Look for lots of color in your lettuce and veggies when selecting your salad. If there is meat added, make it a lean choice, like roasted skinless chicken breast. Also, make sure the sandwich or salad you buy is well chilled.

Mexican Food. Stay away from the fried choices. Go for entrees like bean or grilled chicken burritos and soft tacos (chicken or fish). Beans are generally a good, filling option, especially if they are whole beans rather than refried. Pass up the sour cream and processed cheese sauce in favor of fresh salsa.

Coffee Shop/Bakery. A certain coffee chain seems to be at every corner of most American cities, and the airport is no exception. Starbucks offers a couple of lower-fat bakery options, both with 3 grams of fat and from 3 to 5 grams of fiber: the low-fat Cranberry Apple Muffin (290 calories) and the low-fat Oat Fruit Scone (320 calories).

If it's coffee cake you desire, Starbucks has four lower-fat choices:

- Reduced-Fat Banana Dulce Coffee Cake: 360 calories, 7 grams fat.

- Reduced-Fat Blueberry Coffee Cake: 310 calories, 10 grams fat.
- Reduced-Fat Cinnamon Swirl Coffee Cake: 300 calories, 8 grams fat.
- Reduced-Fat Orange Crème Coffee Cake: 320 calories, 8 grams fat.

For a warm breakfast, your best bet is the Whole Grain Western Omelet Wrap, with 300 calories, 13 grams of fat, and 3 grams fiber.

Starbucks has plenty of drinks that are around 150 calories and contain almost no fat. The rules to order by: buy it "tall" (size), buy it "light" and "nonfat," and definitely buy it with "no whip." If you can, order your coffee drinks "decaf" to help keep you hydrated during your travels.

The Tangerine Frappuccino Juice Blend has fewer than 150 calories if you order the tall size. You can also now order Starbucks' Blended Crème drinks in "light" -- the tall LIGHT Strawberries & Crème Frappuccino Blended Crème totals 150 calories and 0 grams of fat, while the tall LIGHT Orange Crème Frappuccino Blended Crème has just 110 calories and 0 grams fat.

Breakfast and Bagel Shop. It's easy to buy a bagel to bring on the plane with you for breakfast or lunch. A whole-wheat bagel has about 4 grams of fiber, and can be a great choice if you fill it with something light. Try light cream cheese, or turkey breast with veggies and a little avocado. If your stomach is sensitive on travel days, you might even feel better chewing on a plain bagel.

If you want a traditional breakfast, skip the fried potatoes and sausage and choose an egg entrée that is topped or filled with vegetables, not greasy meat. Ask if they can make your egg dish with egg substitute, or one whole egg and two egg whites. If it comes with cheese, ask them to use half the usual amount. If you're partial to pancakes or waffles, don't drench them with butter or syrup, since most restaurant pancakes/waffles are already pretty rich. Top them with fresh fruit instead.

Healthy Traveler Rule No. 3: Know What to Avoid

"Fried foods are not great unless you want to sleep the entire trip with a belly full of fat," warns Gerbstadt.

It's important to drink wisely, too. Too much caffeine can promote dehydration, Gerbstadt says. If you must have coffee, Gerbstadt suggests indulging in one cup only, with skim, low-fat or soy milk added.

And the last thing anyone wants when traveling is a case of food poisoning. Gerbstadt warns that any food that requires refrigeration -- like meat, cheese, milk, or foods that contain any of these ingredients -- should be eaten within two hours without refrigeration.

Healthy Traveler Rule No. 4: Soothe Your Stomach

If you tend to get stomach upset while flying, avoid beverages that are known to irritate the stomach (like coffee, alcohol, and orange juice). Ask for drinks that seem to soothe the gastrointestinal tract, like club soda or herb tea.

"Keeping well-hydrated during travel is essential to enduring the rigors of travel," says Anthony Starpoli, MD, an attending physician in gastroenterology at St. Vincent's Catholic Medical Center in Manhattan.

Starpoli also recommends avoiding fried, greasy, rich, or processed food items. That's because fatty foods in general keep food in the stomach longer and can trigger acid reflux or GERD by weakening the lower esophageal sphincter muscle.

If you want to bring along some foods that will help settle your stomach before or during the flight, Starpoli suggests packing crackers, cheese, vegetable sticks, or some fruit. And you can buy a carton of yogurt at the airport, if you like.

"Some yogurt is not a bad idea, unless lactose is an issue," Starpoli says.