



build a better salad

Do the endless options at the salad bar have you stumped? Lettuce show you the way with this detailed guide

By Lisa Drayer



Salad Starter: Lettuce

The darker the leaf, the more vitamins it contains. Look for spinach, romaine, arugula, and chicory to get the most folate and beta-carotene — an antioxidant that helps rid your body of disease-causing chemicals in addition to protecting your eyes and skin. Love your iceberg? "Mix dark greens with lighter ones to tone down their bitter taste," says Jackie Newgent, R.D., a nutritionist and culinary instructor at the Institute of Culinary Education in New York City.

Produce Junction: Fruits and Vegetables

The more colorful your mix of vegetables, the more nutrients you'll consume. Fill your plate with these nutritional superstars first — they offer the most vitamins and minerals per bite. Cherry tomatoes are rich in lycopene and may help ward off cardiovascular disease in women. Broccoli boasts vitamin C, beta-carotene, fiber, and calcium.

When you face a rainbow selection of peppers, green means stop: Red and yellow peppers contain more than twice the amount of vitamin C than the green ones, which are really just unripe versions of the more colorful varieties. You can never go wrong with carrots, one of the best sources of beta-carotene.

Even though they may look like decoration, alfalfa sprouts are loaded with vitamins and minerals and cost you very few calories. To avoid the risk of foodborne illnesses like salmonella and E. coli, choose cooked sprouts — they'll look less green and less crisp.

Some vegetables you should limit: Corn, artichoke hearts, beets, and sun-dried tomatoes are popular salad bar staples, but their high sugar and starch content means calories add up quickly without providing much of a nutritional benefit. For instance, sun-dried tomatoes have 139 calories per cup and beets weigh in at 75 for the same portion — compared with the 44 calories found in 1 cup of broccoli.

All fruit is not created equal. With no water to take up space, dried fruit packs a high caloric punch, especially if you're using a big serving spoon. Avoid large portions of dried cranberries (108 calories for 1/4 cup) and raisins (92 calories for the same size portion).



Stick with fresh fruit like berries, pears, or orange slices. These treats will sweeten your salad without too many calories (oranges have 22 calories for 1/4 cup), and their high water content will help keep you full.

A Meaty Issue: Protein

Protein is a must-have, since the nutrient keeps you satisfied and prevents cravings. Think lean: Opt for tuna, salmon, tofu, beans, chickpeas, or skinless chicken or turkey, and keep portions small. Three ounces — the size of a deck of cards or a computer mouse — is a reasonable amount. Beware anything two-toned; the extra skin means extra calories and fat.

Fat Facts: The Extras Add Up

Limit yourself to one healthy, monounsaturated fat per salad (aside from the dressing), such as nuts, seeds, olives, or avocado. Ten olives or 1/4 cup of nuts (the size of a golf ball) are surprisingly satisfying.

Cheese is high in saturated fat and sodium and is not the best source of calcium for the calories, says Lisa Young, Ph.D., R.D., an adjunct professor of nutrition at New York University and author of *The Portion Teller*. If you can't lose the cheese, limit it to 1 ounce (about four dice worth) and go for lower-fat versions like goat or mozzarella instead of cheddar or blue. Or mix half low-fat with half regular cheese. "In our study, women didn't taste any difference when we combined low-fat cheese with regular," even though the calorie count was cut almost in half, says Barbara Rolls, Ph.D., professor of nutritional sciences at Pennsylvania State University and author of *The Volumetrics Eating Plan*.

Craving carbs? Crush three or four crackers or baked chips onto your salad. Don't sabotage a healthy meal with croutons. They're nutritional minefields, made with enriched wheat flour and drenched in oil.

Dress to Impress: Salad Dressings

Watch the serving size when you hit the dressing: Even honey-mustard dressing weighs in at more than 200 calories per 1/4 cup. One ladle (about 1/4 cup) of full-fat ranch or Caesar packs 300 calories. Two ladles are the equivalent of two hot-fudge sundaes. "Ideally, you want to go for 1 tablespoon of dressing, which is what would fill half a shot glass," Dr. Young says. If you choose low-fat dressing, you can double that. A plastic takeout dressing container holds about 2 tablespoons, so fill accordingly.

Walk right past that fat-free French. A recent study found that people who ate salads with fat-free dressing absorbed fewer essential nutrients than those with fat in their salads, and that reduced-fat dressing boosted absorption of good-for-you nutrients like beta-carotene and lycopene compared with fat-free. A little fat is necessary to help your body process vitamins.

We all know that oil and vinegar is better than creamy dressing — it's lower in fat and calories, and the fat you take in from the olive oil is the heart-healthy kind — but do some maneuvering to save calories. "Typically, regular vinaigrettes, like a balsamic, are three parts oil to one part vinegar. So when trying to lose weight, do the reverse: three parts vinegar to one part oil," Newgent says.

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