

How to cut calories in your favourite summertime foods

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Hot weather means picnics, barbecues—and lots of extra calories. But a few tweaks can help lower the calorie count to keep our favourite summertime foods on the menu.

"Since we'll be enjoying the classics we love all summer, it's a good idea to think about ways to be healthier in what goes on our plates," said Sabina Valentine, a nutrition expert with the Centre for Health and Nutrition in the University of Alberta's School of Public Health.

Sugar, sodium and fat all figure heavily in traditional fare like hotdogs, coleslaw and ice cream—especially the store-bought kind—but there are ways to lower the sin factor, she said. "It's all about what goes into the ingredients."

Here are some tips for having your potato salad and eating it too.

Make it yourself

Give the deli counter a pass and make your own salads. Premade side dishes are high in fat and sodium to help give them a longer shelf life. But that can lead to health issues like elevated blood pressure. "When you prepare the food yourself, you have more control over the quality of the nutrition and something that's freshly prepared always tastes better."

Switch up the ingredients

When making your own dishes, use lighter substitutes to replace go-to ingredients like fat and salt. "There are many recipes now that give better options," Valentine said. Instead of mayonnaise in favourites like potato or pasta salad, use Greek yogurt or create a lighter oil-and-vinegar dressing. Replace salt with herbs and spices like cumin, thyme and curry. Use lean ground meat to make your own beef, chicken or turkey burgers. "Or make tofu burgers, which offer extra protein and antioxidants." Forget the hot dogs—"they're high in nitrates and carcinogens"—and grill foil-wrapped herbed fish or meat and veggie kebabs instead, Valentine suggested. For steak, go lean and marinate it in oil, soy sauce and a dash of mustard. Instead of chips, add crunch to the picnic table with veggie trays or baked slices of whole wheat pita bread.

For dessert, skip the cake, squares and ice cream and instead, take to the grill with sliced bananas, peaches, pears or pineapple. "Fruit's natural sugar makes the dessert so sweet when it's barbecued, you don't need to add anything to it."

Homemade frozen smoothie popsicles are great for kids, she added.

Drinking alcohol? Just add water

Popping cold brews and drinks is also a summer ritual, but to keep the calorie count from ballooning, choose diet soda or water flavoured with fruit slices. "It's also wise to keep in mind that beer and wine are diuretics, which cause you to lose more fluid than you're drinking, so they could be potentially dehydrating."

One or two alcoholic drinks for women and two to three for men, alternating with glasses of water, will help ward off empty calories and dehydration, Valentine said. And don't assume light beer is any less calorie-dense, she added: "Most brands contain almost as much alcohol

as regular beer."

Follow the 80/20 rule

If you just can't pass up that creamy salad, giant steak or slice of pie, then don't. "Don't deny yourself the pleasure of indulging in a food you love, just do it in moderation," Valentine said. A good rule of thumb is the 80/20 rule: Treat yourself 20 per cent of the time and stick to a healthy, balanced eating plan the other 80 per cent.

Provided by University of Alberta

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