

# Forbes

## 10 Healthiest Fast Food Restaurants



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**Editor's Note:** In "Hey, Health Coach," Sarah Hays Coomer answers reader questions about the intersection of health and overall well-being. Have a question? Send her a message (and don't forget to use a sleuthy pseudonym!).

**Hey, Health Coach,**

***I'm in sales and on the road for work a lot, driving all over the country. I'm always rushing, and my health is taking a beating from living on fast food. I know there have to be better options than what I'm eating right now. What are the healthiest fast food restaurants or dishes I can look for?***

**— On The Road Again**

**Dear On The Road Again,**

Fast food doesn't have to be bad for you. It doesn't offer much of a chance to slow down, rest and digest, but, like anything else in life, it's all in the way you approach it.

**Fast food can be comforting and easy. It satisfies cravings, and sometimes it's the most inexpensive and accessible choice. Fast food is part of American life, and, for many people, it's a lifeline—including folks like you who travel a lot.**

When you're trying to make any healthy change, especially one that requires making a new choice day after day, clarifying your goals can help you stay focused and reduce your odds of experiencing guilt or frustration if things don't go as planned.

## **What Are Your Goals?**

**Do you want to significantly change your diet or simply make a few healthier choices?**

Both are noble ambitions, and one might be more motivating or realistic than the other. Do you thrive on challenges and love making big changes all at once, or do you prefer to build momentum with incremental changes to avoid feeling stressed out or deprived? Any healthy choice nurtures your body, and the degree to which you make those changes is up to you.

So, what's your objective? Are you trying to stick with a specific diet on the road (like [vegan](#), [gluten-free](#) or [high-protein](#)) or simply switch from supersized to small portions? Is the goal to cut back on fat or sugar, or do you want to take a little more time to sit down and eat regardless of where you are?

## **What exactly do you mean by “fast”?**

This question can help you determine how much flexibility you have. Do you need to exit off the freeway and drive through, or can you venture a little further into town for a more nutritious grab-and-go meal?

There are lots of healthy build-your-own salad, noodle and grain bowl restaurants, but many are located in suburban or urban centers. You might not see signs for them on the interstate, but most have apps that allow you to find their locations and place your order in advance. Using these apps can keep you rolling and open up a world of possibilities.

## **10 Fast Food Restaurants With Healthy Options**

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Some of the restaurants below are traditional fast food joints for when you need sustenance right off the exit ramp. Others are newer chains that cater directly to health-conscious customers. All have at least 400 locations throughout the U.S. and menu items that cater to specific health concerns.

### **Panera Bread**

Panera's menu is full of options for a healthy meal. It lists nutritional information on the menu, and you can often find locations not far off freeway exits. You can order salads with a variety of lean proteins, fruits and vegetables, as well as “pick two” dishes from a menu of soups, salads and sandwiches. Just be mindful of dishes that are excessively cheesy, creamy or sugary, and choose whole-grain bread when possible. You can also select an apple as a side rather than chips or a baguette.

### **Chipotle**

Chipotle allows customers to build their own meals. You can create salads or burrito bowls with lots of protein, fiber and not too much fat. Queso, sour cream and chips all add significant calories and fat, but you don't have to deprive yourself. Smaller portions help, or you can skip the chips entirely.



## Starbucks

Starbucks created several healthy options in recent years, including steel cut oatmeal, egg white wraps and egg bites, and it offers a variety of protein boxes that feature fresh fruit, hard-boiled eggs, whole-grain crackers and nut butter.

## Sweetgreen

Sweetgreen may not pop up often on freeway signs, but with locations in 21 states, it's widely available in certain areas. The chain offers warm bowls with wild rice or quinoa as a base, as well as salads on a bed of kale, romaine lettuce, arugula or spinach. Toppings include nuts, seeds, beans, a wide variety of vegetables and proteins, and a choice of 15 dressings or sauces. Build your own bowl or select one of the brand's pre-made menu items.

## CAVA

CAVA is another fast-casual restaurant with customizable hot bowls, salads and pita wraps. The menu leans [Mediterranean](#) with options like roasted eggplant, falafel, grilled meats, hummus and tahini dressing. The brand's RightRice is made from a blend of lentils, chickpeas, green peas and rice. According to the company, RightRice contains double the protein, five times the fiber and 40% fewer net carbohydrates than a standard portion of white rice.

## Noodles & Company

At Noodles & Company, you can order a noodle bowl with vegetables, a choice of sauce and proteins that include Impossible "chicken," tofu, shrimp, grilled chicken, meatballs or beef. The chain also offers an option to substitute regular pasta with zucchini noodles, gluten-free shells or high-protein noodles called LEANguini. Soups and salads are available as well.

## Wendy's

Unlike many traditional fast food restaurants, Wendy's has four mainstay salads on its menu—the cobb, apple pecan, parmesan caesar and taco salads—all of which can be ordered vegetarian. Just be aware of ingredients like cheese, tortilla chips and heavy dressings that can add extra fat and calories. Wendy's also offers a grilled chicken wrap, baked potatoes and apple bites that can be ordered as a side.

## Burger King

For vegetarians, Burger King carries Impossible burgers, but it's important to note that there's only a 40-calorie difference between a Whopper and an Impossible Whopper, and all burgers are grilled on the same broilers. Skipping the mayonnaise and cheese or ordering any burger on a lettuce wrap helps cut simple carbohydrates and saturated fat.

## Smoothie King

Smoothies can be a good option when you're low on time and in need of a boost. Smoothie King—and other shops like Robeks, Jamba Juice and Nektar—create blends with a variety of fruits, vegetables, dairy and plant-based milks, protein powders, fiber, probiotics and caffeine from sources like coffee and green tea.

However, smoothies can be less satiating than a meal of whole foods. Also be careful to check the calories on any smoothie you drink regularly. The large sizes can be surprisingly high in sugar, with over 800 calories per drink.

## Panda Express

Panda Express offers "Wok Smart" menu items that are guaranteed to have at least 8 grams of protein and contain fewer than 300 calories. The chain also offers steamed brown rice, super greens and several tofu dishes, as well as grilled shrimp and chicken entrees. It also has kids' meals that come with apple crisps and a bottle of water.

Heads up for gluten-free folks: Everything on the Panda Express menu contains gluten except the brown and white steamed rice.