

Food Truck Frenzy: The Good and the Bad

Food trucks have been around since the 1870s when chuckwagons that would prepare and serve meals to cowboys on a cattle drive. Today, more food trucks and mobile vendors are appearing at everywhere at parks, festivals, and fairs. They are around In urban areas as well as rural, areas around the country. Food trucks provide a variety for consumers and have the potential to increase access to nutritious foods in vulnerable communities. Along with the pros that come with the convenience and variety of food trucks, there are also cons that consumers should be aware of. Those concerns revolve around the issues of cleanliness, food safety, healthfulness of food and portion size.

Food trucks must go through initial inspections before they are given permits. They must comply with state and local requirements in order to sell food. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention study identified critical risk factors among food trucks that contribute to foodborne illness, making them more likely to fail health inspections. The top issues cited were lack of hand washing, improper food temperatures, cross contamination between raw foods and ready to eat foods and inadequate or no sanitation solution for sanitizing surfaces. Lack of water also results in the inability to wash produce.

Aside from the cleanliness, most food trucks don't serve meals that meet the Food and Drug Administration's nutrition labeling criteria for designation as a "healthy" food. Per serving, qualifying food items would need to blow in fat (3 grams or less) and saturated fat (1 gram or less), contain limited amounts of sodium and cholesterol , and provide 10 percent of the daily value for vitamin A, vitamin C, iron, calcium, protein or fiber. A number of cities provide incentives through preferential permits to vendors which provide healthier choices or locate their trucks in neighborhoods lacking access to fresh, unprocessed food.

Eating from a food truck can be a fun experience for trying new foods. Here are some recommendations to keep you from over eating. These are the same recommendations that you would follow at any restaurant to cut back on unnecessary calories and less healthy additives and serving safely.

- Go with family or friends and share meals. That way you can eat smaller portions while trying a variety of foods.
- Hand held foods like tacos, gyros and wraps are popular food truck options. They can include all of your basic food groups.
- Choose corn tortillas instead of flour and whole grain wraps and tacos for healthier options.
- If you decide to eat a wrap or sandwich, grab a fork and plate and eat the nutrient-filled inside and less of the wrapping. That ways you will be able to taste all the flavors and feel the textures of your foods while cutting back on extra calories.
- Choose lean protein such as chicken, fish, lean beef or tofu. Ask that they be grilled, broiled, roasted or baked rather than fried.
- Ask for sauces on the side.
- Always wash your hands before eating and drinking.

- Make sure food workers aren't touching food with bare hands, that they are wearing gloves, using tongs, wax paper or other methods to prevent contamination.

Source: Rutgers Extension.