



Takeaway food

Takeaway food certainly gets some bad press, but is it all bad or are there healthy options available?

AT A GLANCE

Nutritional content.

Safefood survey.

Guide to ordering.

Consumers may have tightened their purse strings but takeaway food outlets are springing up everywhere and seem to be increasing in popularity. This may be due to the fact that consumers simply cannot afford to dine out in expensive restaurants as frequently as they might have done in the past. Domino's Pizza

Takeaway Outlets, for instance, are bucking the downturn in Ireland and last year it was reported that the Tallaght Domino's Pizza franchise was the busiest in the world. Many takeaways are offering meal deals and daily specials to attract even more consumers to avail of their menus.

Unfortunately, when it comes to takeaways, the healthiest options aren't always obvious. Although the less healthy options can be quite tasty, if you knew the fat and calorie content of takeaway food, you could be left with a bad taste in your mouth. Certainly, some elements of takeaway food can be very



good for you – think of all the anti-oxidant rich mushrooms and ginger used in Chinese cooking and the healthy spices used in traditional Indian curries – but other elements of takeaway food can be detrimental to your health – namely the large portion sizes and the high levels of saturated fat and salt added during the cooking process.

Why the bad press?

Figures from the SLAN 2007 (Survey of Lifestyle, Attitude & Nutrition) Report indicate that 38% of the population of

the Republic of Ireland is overweight and a further 23% are obese. This means that, in total, 61% of the population are either overweight or obese. In order to tackle obesity and the chronic diseases associated with it, individuals must be enabled to make healthy choices when it comes to nutrition. In order to make it easier for consumers to choose healthy options, they need to have access to precise information about their food choices at the point of sale. When it comes to takeaways, however, it can be difficult for consumers to determine exactly what they are eating because there is no law that requires the nutritional details or even the ingredients in takeaway food to be displayed.

We believe that nutritional information about takeaway meals, including calorie content, salt content, sugar content, and fat content should be available clearly at the point of sale in takeaway food chains. This means that the information should be available on the menu or the menu board when the consumer is choosing what to order. Even takeaways with only one or a few outlets should at least indicate the low-fat options on their menus. Takeaway food chains such as Burger King, McDonalds, KFC and Subway often have items that are high in calories, saturated fat, sugar and salt on their menus but they don't offer nutritional information on the menu boards. Instead, they print it on their websites, on napkins or on tray-liners. It is usually too late when consumers get the information from these sources as they will most likely have already paid for and consumed the food by then.

Another problem with many takeaways is the large portions that they sell. The way the larger portions are priced usually makes super-sized portions more appealing. Consumers can trade up from a small or medium size to a large portion for a small cost but in doing so can potentially double the calories consumed. This makes it all too easy to over-eat. Takeaway food providers should have a responsibility to make it clear what is in the food they serve.

In New York, chain restaurants with 15 or more national outlets must list the calorie content of standard items on their menus or menu boards. The calorie information that is given must be at least as prominent as the price information.

Nutritional content

There is evidence to show that takeaway food is often very high in calories, saturated fat, salt and sugar. In 2008, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI, see *Useful contacts*) collected 150 samples of fast food from twelve fast food restaurants to determine their fat content and fatty acid composition, including trans-fatty acids (TFAs) which can affect blood cholesterol levels and contribute to heart disease. The survey looked at a cross section of fast food products including chips, burgers, chicken nuggets, desserts, pizzas and battered products such as fish. Although the results indicated that levels of TFAs in the majority of the products surveyed were low, the survey indicated that levels of saturated fats in some samples were high (i.e. greater than 10g of saturated fat).

In all, over 34% of surveyed products had high levels of saturated fat, with over half of the surveyed menus in some outlets high in saturated fats. The survey also found that the portion size of products from traditional fast food shops tended to be larger and showed the presence of higher levels of TFA and saturated fat in comparison to similar products from international fast-food chains. According to Dr. Wayne Anderson, Chief Specialist Food Science, FSAI, the level of saturated fat that was found in the products surveyed is a concern. "New technology has provided healthier alternatives to hydrogenated oils and fast food businesses need to be vigilant when ordering products such as cooking oil to ensure that they contain low levels of both TFAs and saturated fat."

Meanwhile, a 2008 *Which?* report surveyed the calorie, sugar, fat, saturated fat, and salt content of Indian, Chinese and pizza takeaways, and found that a single Indian takeaway could contain 23.2g of saturated fat, higher than the recommended 20g maximum daily allowance for women. The survey also found that some Indian and Chinese takeaway meals were so high in calories that they would contribute almost 75% of a female adult's daily estimated average requirement of calories (which is in the region of 1,950 calories).

Safefood Survey

A survey published in 2009 by Safefood (see *Useful contacts*) looked at the nutritional content of chicken and potato products sold in fast food and

convenience outlets in Ireland. Both chicken and potatoes as raw ingredients are low in fat, but many of these products are processed with the addition of ingredients such as coatings that add to their fat and salt content.

According to Safefood, “the use of cooking methods such as deep fat frying commonly used in fast food outlets also results in the addition of excess fat.” In total, 263 chicken products including chicken tenders/goujons, chicken fillets and chicken thighs, and 245 potato products, including chips and potato wedges, were purchased for the survey from outlets ranging from deli counters to fast food chains.

The variability in portion sizes was a key issue highlighted by the survey. In the case of chicken, some products surveyed contained up to four average portions (taking into account that some products contained bones). When it came to potato products, 81% of chips sampled had a portion size greater than 165g (the average portion of chips for adults is 165g) and 19% of samples contained more than two of these portions. This indicates that some products sampled in this survey contained almost three adult portions. Independent local outlets were found to have the largest portion sizes.

The report highlighted the importance of sharing a large portion or requesting a smaller or half portion. Safefood also recommends to consumers to opt for chicken products without or with less coating and to remove the skin before eating it to help to reduce fat intake. The report also recommends that consumers request that salt is not added to food during the preparation process.

Guide to healthier takeaways

We all know takeaways are not renowned for providing the healthiest of meals but sometimes they are the most convenient option and all worries about saturated fat, salt and calories go out the window.

If you really need to order a takeaway, try at least to be more aware of what you are eating. By making healthier choices when you order, you can still enjoy the convenience of fast food, albeit preferably on an occasional basis.

Consumer Choice looked at the most common takeaway options and put together a brief guide on which dishes to choose and which ones to avoid. This is just a rough guide because every

FOOD SAFETY ENFORCEMENT ORDERS

The Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) continually monitors food on the market for the protection of public health. In 2009, there were a total of 54 enforcement orders served for breaches in food safety legislation, compared with 46 in 2008. The FSAI has re-emphasised that it is unacceptable that food businesses are continuing to breach food safety laws and warns all food business operators to place robust food safety measures and hygiene practices top of their agenda for the new decade or face the full rigors of the law being imposed.

Between 1 January and 31 December 2009, enforcement officers served 34 closure orders, seven improvement orders and 13 prohibition orders on food businesses throughout the country. According to Professor Alan Reilly, Chief Executive of the FSAI, “Consumers have to be confident that the food they are eating is safe to eat and the FSAI will continue to take a zero tolerance policy to breaches of food safety legislation.”

Consumers may be confused about the different kinds of enforcement orders served by the FSAI. Here’s what might be on the menu for non-compliant businesses:

- A **closure order** is served where it is deemed that there is or there is likely to be a grave and immediate danger to public health at or in the premises; or where an Improvement order is not complied with. Closure orders can refer to the immediate closure of all or part of the food premises, or all or some of its activities.
- An **improvement order** may be issued by the District Court if an improvement notice is not complied with within a defined period. Further non-compliance can result in a closure order also being served.
- An **improvement notice** is served when it is deemed that any activity involving the handling, preparation, etc of food or the condition of a premises (or part thereof) where this activity takes place, is of such a nature that if it persists it will or is likely to pose a risk to public health.
- A **prohibition order** is issued if the activities (handling, processing, disposal, manufacturing, storage, distribution or selling food) involve or are likely to involve a serious risk to public health from a particular product, class, batch or item of food.

Details of food businesses that have been served with enforcement orders are published on the FSAI’s website at www.fsai.ie.

takeaway outlet uses different ingredients and the portion sizes and cooking methods can also vary widely.

Remember, Department of Health guidelines say that women should have no more than 2,000 calories and 70g of fat daily, and men no more than 2,500 calories and 95g fat in total.

Burger chain takeaways

It can be difficult to figure out what the best option is when you are standing in a burger joint, surrounded by ads for ‘Whoppers’ and Meal Deals. A typical meal usually consists of a burger, chips and a drink and the calories don’t take long to mount up.

Choose:

- Small portion of chips rather than large (or skip them altogether).
- Regular burger with salad.
- Salad burger with grilled onions and mushrooms.
- Sauces, mayonnaise and cheese on the side so you can control how much you add.
- Grilled chicken rather than fried chicken sandwich.

Avoid:

- Supersized or large portions and ‘Combo’ meals.
- ‘Double’ cheese burgers with mayo, special sauce, and bacon – the works!
- Deep fried onion rings and chicken nuggets.
- Salads which are heavy on dressings and sauces.

Chinese takeaway

Asian cultures tend to eat healthy food and emphasise vegetables and tofu over meat. However, many dishes on Chinese takeaway menus are cooked in a lot of oil and are often deep-fried. The main dishes aren’t the worst culprits when it comes to high levels of saturated fat and calories. It’s the starters and side orders that can ruin your intentions to make the healthiest choice.

Choose:

- Boiled or steamed rather than fried or egg fried rice.
- Soups, for example, miso soup or chicken and sweetcorn soup - usually low in fat.
- Steamed or stir-fried vegetables/

seafood/beef/chicken dishes e.g. king prawns, ginger and spring onions.

Avoid:

- Crispy duck – calories from the fatty skin add up.
- Deep-fried or ‘battered’ dishes and starters like spring rolls, prawn toast or deep fried spare ribs.
- Satay dishes.
- Prawn crackers – although they are usually free, they add unnecessary fat and calories to your meal.

Fish and chips takeaway

Although fish is packed with protein, vitamins and Omega-3s, when it comes to takeaways, the fish is normally deep fried, covered in batter and accompanied by large portions of chips. **Tip** - Dab your fish and chips with a napkin before eating to remove the extra grease!

Choose:

- No batter or leave the soggy batter.
- Chunky chips as they absorb less oil than thin cut chips.
- Salad, peas or beans instead of chips on the side.

Avoid:

- Battered calamari rings.
- Extras such as curry sauce, mayonnaise, gravy, salt and vinegar.

Fried chicken takeaway

Fried chicken in the traditional ‘snack box’ can pack a fattening punch especially when you add a calorific beverage and a serving of chips.

Choose:

- Grilled or skinless rather than fried chicken.
- Grilled chicken breast sandwich without breadcrumb covering.
- Add salad or a jacket potato rather than chips as a side order.

Avoid:

- The skin - take it off if it is deep fried.
- Chicken nuggets.

Indian takeaway

Spices such as turmeric and cumin which are used in traditional Indian dishes are renowned for their health benefits. Unfortunately, many takeaway Indian dishes contain a lot of oil, and by the time the starters and side dishes are accounted for, you may well end up ingesting far more calories than you realise.

Choose:

- Chappati instead of Naan.
- Less sauce and more vegetables.
- Tomato-based sauces such as Jalfrezi,

Rogan or Madras.

- Dry dishes like tandoori chicken.
- Boiled rather than pilau rice.
- Side dishes of Dhal (lentils).

Avoid:

- Cream or coconut based dishes such as Korma, Masala and Pasanda.
- Deep-fried starters such as an onion bhaji and samosas.

Italian

This can be a very healthy cuisine as it generally includes plenty of healthy vegetables and salads and lashings of heart-friendly olive oil.

Choose:

- Tomato-based pasta dishes rather than cream-based dishes.
- Dishes with lean meats and fish.
- Extra salad or vegetable portions.

Avoid:

- Fried or thick crust menu items.
- Alfredo, carbonara, saltimbocca, and parmigiana (heavy on cream and cheese).

Pizza

If you choose your base and toppings wisely, you can easily lower the calorie and fat content of your pizza.

Choose:

- Thin base.
- Small or regular size.
- Vegetable toppings such as sweetcorn, peppers, pineapple, mushroom, onions, chillies, spinach, olives and tomato.
- Chicken and seafood rather than sausage meat toppings.
- Breadsticks or a jacket potato on the side.
- Salad instead of chips.

Avoid:

- Thick pizza base.
- Large or extra-large pizza.
- Double meat, extra cheese, salami, sausage and bacon toppings.
- Meal-deals.
- Garlic bread, chicken wings/dippers, wedges and stuffed potato skins on the side.

Sandwich shops

There are sandwich chains in every town in Ireland, and many newsagents and service stations offer rolls, sandwiches and wraps for takeaway. The options are endless - hot, cold, wrapped, foot-long, with or without chips/crisps/cookies/salad/soup.

Instead of choosing a meal deal with added crisps, cookies and a soft drink, choose a side salad, fruit, yoghurt or bottled water to accompany your meal. There are usually plenty of healthy options available as long as you are wise with your choices.

Choose:

- Wraps or thin bread instead of thick crust bread or rolls.
- Wholegrain, rye or brown instead of white bread.
- Lean meat, tuna or skinless chicken filling.
- Vegetable and salad fillings.
- Light, lean or reduced fat versions of items - such as low-fat cheese.
- Low-fat dressing or mustard instead of butter and mayo.

Avoid:

- High-fat meat such as sausage, salami and bacon.
- Extra cheese.
- Adding extra mayo and special sauces.

Useful contacts

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choice comment

Takeaways may be more affordable than eating out and may be quicker than preparing food from scratch, but it pays to know what the healthiest options are. And if you keep a supply of ingredients for quick and easy meals in your home, you may be less tempted to order takeaway in the first place. We are not suggesting that you give up takeaway altogether but unless your favourite takeaway provides information about the nutritional content (and we believe that consumers should always be provided with this information) you could be getting more than you bargained for in terms of sugar, salt and fat.

Some people feel they have no choice but to resort to takeaway because they work long hours. However, if you know that you will be working late or if you do so regularly, the healthiest option is to do the preparation in advance. For instance, the night before you work late, you could make enough dinner for two evenings and keep the second serving in the fridge to heat up the next day. This is quicker than stopping for a takeaway or waiting for a delivery and it means that you can control what goes into your food. Alternatively, there are some healthy frozen meals available in some of the supermarkets – check the nutritional label to find options which are low in saturated fat, sugar and salt. At least then you will be aware of exactly what you are consuming.