

Creating a Healthy Salad

Salads are usually served at the beginning of a meal, but a salad can also make a healthy, low-calorie meal all by itself. When you use lots of fruits and vegetables, they can also be loaded with vitamins and antioxidants. The key to keeping salads interesting is to change the ingredients each time you make one. Don't just think of the simple garden salad, but imagine adding fruits, nuts, and lean meats to your salad to make a great low-calorie, highly nutritious meal.

Constructing a salad is easy, just use this visual.

1/2 lettuce: 1/4 protein: 1/4 raw vegetable and/ or fruit

Add flavor (roasted nuts, seeds or sprinkling of aged cheese, squeeze of lemon/ lime juice)

Top with lean dressing (non-cream based dressings are the healthiest choice)

2 cups of spinach

4 oz chicken breast, cooked and sliced

¼ cup raspberries

Sprinkle with toasted almonds and a little aged parmesan

2 T Raspberry Vinaigrette

Greens

Most salads start with a pile of greens. Since greens are low in calories and are a good source of fiber, it's a great way to add volume to your meal without adding a lot of calories. There are different varieties of lettuce, such as iceberg, leaf, spinach, escarole, romaine, or butter. The darker lettuces offer more vitamins than pale iceberg, for example. Spinach has iron, and all varieties are low in calories. One cup of shredded lettuce has about 5 to 10 calories.

Vegetables

Almost any raw vegetable can be cut up and added to a salad. Green beans, snap peas, carrots, radishes, broccoli, cauliflower, zucchini, asparagus, artichokes, avocados, tomatoes, and cucumbers are all great suggestions. We need five to nine servings of fruits and vegetables per day, so eating a salad is a good way to meet those needs. Brightly colored vegetables have bioflavonoids, and the dark green vegetables are lowest in calories -- about 20 calories per half cup serving.

Fruit

Blueberries, raspberries, blackberries, apple slices and raisins add vitamins and antioxidants. The delicious burst of flavor and sweetness they add can also help you cut back on, or eliminate, high-calories salad dressings. A half cup of apple slices has 30 calories, and a half cup of berries has about 40 calories.

Meat and Cheese

To make a meal of a salad, you may wish to add some healthy protein sources like chopped or sliced hard-boiled eggs, lean beef, cooked shrimp, tuna, chicken breast, or strips of cheese. Make sure to measure your protein sources, since meats and cheese have more calories than fruit or vegetables. Avoid fried meats like chicken strips or battered and fried shrimp. They contain unhealthy fats and lots of calories. A quarter cup of chopped chicken meat or one egg will add 75 calories. Half a can of tuna will add about 80 calories. Two ounces of cubed or shredded mozzarella or cheddar cheese may add up to 200 calories.

Nuts

Sprinkle a few nuts like walnuts, pecans, almonds, or cashews for a nice crunch. Just a few nuts will do, about one-eighth cup of nuts adds about 90 calories. Walnuts are a great source of omega-3 essential fatty acids, and all of the nuts add protein and heart-healthy polyunsaturated fatty acids.

Salad Dressing

One tablespoon of regular commercial salad dressing will add 50 to 80 calories, so be careful to measure how much you use. A large salad may tempt you to use a lot more, just remember that one-quarter cup of dressing could add up to 300 calories. Low fat dressings (focus on non-cream based dressings) are available, which offer fewer calories. A salad with a variety of fruits and vegetables really doesn't need to be drowned in dressing; some freshly squeezed lemon or lime juice will likely be enough to suit your taste.