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Airport Food Review

A report by the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine Winter 2003

As the skies fill with hungry holiday travelers, the nutrition experts at the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM) have reviewed the healthfulness of airport food and found that, in general, food offerings are improving. This annual report, now in its third year, evaluates the availability of healthful entrées at restaurants in the nation’s busiest airports.

The report comes at a pivotal time. Over the past year, some major airlines have stopped serving wholesome in-flight meals—or eliminated food service completely. This trend has forced passengers to rely more heavily on airports to deliver nutritious alternatives. Are airports meeting that need?

Methodology

The review was conducted from July to October of 2003. PCRM nutritionists surveyed the 15 busiest U.S. airports for the availability of healthful entrées. The final percentage score for each airport was derived by dividing the facility’s number of healthful restaurants by the total number of restaurants. PCRM defined a healthful entrée as a breakfast, lunch, or dinner item that was low in fat, high in fiber, and cholesterol-free. A restaurant was rated as healthful if it served at least one entrée meeting these requirements. PCRM surveyed only restaurants serving breakfast, lunch, or dinner entrées, so vendors not offering entrées, such as most yogurt and coffee shops, were not evaluated.

Results

PCRM nutritionists discovered that healthful food has become more available at airports over the past year, with some cities making important improvements. Denver, which took first place in the current review, has made steady gains, scoring 83 percent this year, up from 61 percent in 2001 and 79 percent in 2002. Chicago O’Hare gained 29 percentage points from 2002. Improvements were also seen in Detroit, which rose from 33 percent in 2001 to 70 percent this year.

But PCRM also identified some airports where nutritious entrées are few and far between, including Minneapolis–St. Paul, which scored 34 percent, and Las Vegas, which scored 38 percent.

Scores at some airports declined dramatically. Most notably, San Francisco, which ranked number one in 2001 and 2002, dropped 14 percentage points and fell to second place. Ten-point declines were also seen at Dallas/Fort Worth and Minneapolis–St. Paul.

Detailed Review

Here is a summary of what PCRM found at individual airports, which are ranked from best to worst:

1. Denver International Airport (83 percent): Denver knocked San Francisco out of the top spot this year by dramatically increasing its range of wholesome meal choices. This year's score represents a 22 percent gain from Denver's rating in 2001. Airport highlights include the portabella mushroom sandwich at Lefty's Colorado Trails Bar and Grill and the vegetable tacos at ¡Que Bueno! Mexican Grille.

2. San Francisco International Airport (82 percent): SFO slipped this year, dropping 14 points from previous years. In the past two reviews, San Francisco scored head and shoulders above other airports—a consistent 96 percent of restaurants at SFO offered at least one healthful meal. Not so in 2003. San Francisco did well in the past because it relied heavily on local eateries that offered many wholesome menu items. But the airport has opened its doors to more national fast-food chains, and these chains introduced the typical high-fat fare, including burgers, fried chicken sandwiches, and hot dogs. However, health-conscious travelers at SFO can still find a fairly impressive range of low-fat, cholesterol-free options, from the falafel sandwich at Deli-up Cafe to vegetarian sushi rolls at Osho to the veggie burger at The Burger Joint.

3. Chicago O'Hare International Airport (71 percent): A pleasant surprise now greets passengers looking for healthful options in the Windy City. After coming in dead last in 2002, Chicago has made incredible improvements over the past year. The airport has nearly doubled the number of eateries offering wholesome food. That improvement is largely due to the introduction of a low-fat, cholesterol-free vegetable sandwich at all of the more than 15 Starbucks stores in the airport. With one of the coffee chain's roasted vegetable panini around every corner, travelers can be virtually certain of access to a healthful meal.

4. Detroit Metro Airport (70 percent): With the help of an ambitious plan to improve airport food, Detroit achieved a remarkable increase in this year's score. Detroit was not rated last year, but it finished in last place in 2001 because only 33 percent of its eateries offered healthful options. Since then, the airport has teamed up with Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit and begun a "Heart Smart" nutrition plan. Though this plan is still being implemented, the airport has already made some positive changes. With such exciting options as the jicama salad at Jose Cuervo Tequileria and the veggie fajitas at Diego's Mexican Village to choose from, travelers in Detroit are less likely to be tempted by high-cholesterol, high-fat meals at McDonald's and Little Caesars.

5. Miami International Airport (68 percent): Travelers heading south for the winter will find a pleasant surprise at this airport, which offers many wholesome options. Miami is well known for Cuban food, and the airport is a great place to find such fare as the black beans and rice at La Carreta Cuban Cuisine. Lighter options include the vegetable platter at Top of the Port and Subway's vegetable sandwich.

6. Houston George Bush Intercontinental Airport (64 percent): Houston jumped 14 points this year by offering more low-fat, cholesterol-free options. Choices include the vegetable fajitas at Panchito's, spaghetti at any of the three Pizza Inn Express outlets, and the vegetarian wrap at Chili's.

7. Newark Liberty International Airport (60 percent): New to PCRM's review, Newark debuts with 60 percent of its eateries offering healthful meals. That score is not overly impressive, but it does mean hungry flyers have some options before they exit the airport and immerse themselves in the tangle of highways and unhealthy fast food that fills northern New Jersey. Good choices include the veggie burrito at Maui Tacos, the California salad at Dick Clark's Restaurant, and the tofu with veggies at Wok-n-Roll.

8. Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport (59 percent): It is the busiest airport in the world, but Atlanta does not seem to be on top of its game when it comes to offering wholesome meals. The airport has improved 10 points from last year, but terminals are still replete with bars and hot dog stands, which offer little or nothing to the health-conscious consumer. However, a discerning traveler can find some bright spots. Competing against such eateries as Hot Dog City, three sushi kiosks run by Plain Delicious offer vegetarian sushi. Passengers hungry for a taste of the South should try Paschal's Southern Delights, where they can enjoy a veggie platter and combine all their favorite vegetable side dishes into one wholesome meal.

9. New York John F. Kennedy International Airport (57 percent): This airport describes itself as the place "Where America Greets the World," but the food offered here presents justifiable doubts about the American diet. JFK plays host to several McDonald's, Krispy Kreme Doughnuts outlets, and even a kosher deli that does not offer a low-fat, high-fiber option, but the airport leaves passengers with very few healthful choices. Travelers can avoid the burgers and the hot dog stand and proceed to Greenwich Village Bistro for a vegetable panini or to Bar Avion for a seasonal greens salad.

10. Seattle-Tacoma International Airport (51 percent): This is the first year PCRM has rated Seattle's airport, and the results reveal plenty of room for improvement. Air travelers in Seattle should avoid the native Starbucks—which, unlike those in Chicago, offer no healthful entrées—and head to Botanica Tea Infusion for vegetable soup or Glacier River Café for a veggie sandwich, soup, or vegetable sushi. Consumers can also stop by China First Express for mixed vegetables and rice.

11. Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport (50 percent): Travelers trying to navigate Sky Harbor are likely to run afoul of the fat and cholesterol served at the airport's six Pizza Hut outlets, six Starbucks stores, and other unhealthful restaurants, including Jodi Maroni's Sausage Kingdom. Phoenix did improve two points from last year, and a few wholesome offerings are available. Kokopelli Deli offers a vegetarian soup, sandwich, and salad, and travelers with a lengthy layover can try the Gardenburger at Left Seat Restaurant.

12. Los Angeles International Airport (47 percent): LAX plays host to McDonald's, Hot Dog Station, and other restaurants serving high-fat, high-cholesterol foods. Among the few wholesome choices: the curry and rice at Tampopo and the veggie burrito at La Salsa.

13. Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport (43 percent): For an airport this size, DFW offers astonishingly few healthful food options, scoring well below Houston's 64 percent. One recipe for improvement: other restaurants could take a cue from the airport's six Au Bon Pain outlets, which all offer a vegetable sandwich. This is an easy addition to any menu. Other wholesome choices include the Strawberry Field Salad at T.G.I. Friday's and the bean burrito at Taco Bell.

14. Las Vegas McCarran International Airport (38 percent): Hungry travelers in Las Vegas face a significant challenge finding healthful food among the airport's eight Pizza Hut outlets and 10 hot dog eateries. The few wholesome options include Prickly Pear Café's veggie sandwich and Burger King's BK Veggie.

15. Minneapolis–St. Paul International Airport (34 percent): This airport offers little healthful food beyond the occasional dinner salad. A couple of exceptions: The veggie burger at Itasca Grille and the pasta primavera at Sbarros are wholesome options—if a traveler is lucky enough to depart from a gate anywhere near these restaurants.

Airport Scores: 2003

1. Denver International Airport:	83%
Healthy restaurants/total restaurants:	29/35
2. San Francisco International Airport:	82%
Healthy restaurants/total restaurants:	41/50
3. Chicago O'Hare International Airport:	71%
Healthy restaurants/total restaurants:	47/66
4. Detroit Metro Airport:	70%
Healthy restaurants/total restaurants:	21/30
5. Miami International Airport:	68%
Healthy restaurants/total restaurants:	19/28
6. Houston George Bush Intercontinental Airport:	64%
Healthy restaurants/total restaurants:	21/33
7. Newark Liberty International Airport:	60%
Healthy restaurants/total restaurants:	29/48
8. Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport:	59%
Healthy restaurants/total restaurants:	42/71
9. New York John F. Kennedy International Airport:	57%
Healthy restaurants/total restaurants:	27/47
10. Seattle-Tacoma International Airport:	51%
Healthy restaurants/total restaurants:	18/35
11. Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport:	50%
Healthy restaurants/total restaurants:	22/44
12. Los Angeles International Airport:	47%
Healthy restaurants/total restaurants:	27/58
13. Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport:	43%
Healthy restaurants/total restaurants:	29/68
14. Las Vegas McCarran International Airport:	38%
Healthy restaurants/total restaurants:	18/48
15. Minneapolis–St. Paul International Airport:	34%
Healthy restaurants/total restaurants:	17/50

Comparisons from Previous Reviews

Airport	Score 2003	Score 2002	Score 2001	Trend from previous rating
Denver International Airport	83%	79%	61%	↑
San Francisco International Airport	82%	96%	96%	□
Chicago O'Hare International Airport	71%	42%	64%	↑
Detroit Metro Airport	70%	Not rated	33%	↑
Miami International Airport	68%	Not rated	Not rated	N/A
Houston George Bush Intercontinental Airport	64%	50%	Not rated	↑
Newark Liberty International Airport	60%	Not rated	Not rated	N/A
Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport	59%	49%	40%	↑
New York John F. Kennedy International Airport	57%	Not rated	Not rated	N/A
Seattle-Tacoma International Airport	51%	Not rated	Not rated	N/A
Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport	50%	48%	58%	↑
Los Angeles International Airport	47%	54%	60%	□
Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport	43%	53%	50%	□
Las Vegas McCarran International Airport	38%	45%	45%	□
Minneapolis–St. Paul International Airport	34%	44%	66%	□