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Airport Food Improving: More Low-Fat and Vegetarian Choices, but Some Cities Lag Behind A report by the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine Winter 2004

As the holiday travel season approaches, nutrition experts at the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM) have evaluated the food served at 12 of the nation's busiest airports. This annual report reviews the availability of healthful entrées at airport eateries.

The report comes during a transition period for airport dining. As a growing number of airlines eliminate in-flight meals, passengers are turning to restaurants in terminals for carry-on entrées. Airport food has also become more important to travelers who must wait out layovers and flight delays behind security checkpoints. In this evolving environment, which airports are best meeting the need for nutritious options?

This year's findings reveal that healthful offerings have become more widely available, though some airports continue to lag behind. On the positive side, 7 percent more airport eateries provide at least one healthful entrée. But 36 percent of restaurants in these airports do not offer even one entrée that is low in fat, high in fiber, and cholesterol-free.

Methodology

The review was conducted from July to October of 2004. PCRM nutrition experts surveyed 12 of the 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.

A restaurant was rated as healthful if it served at least one entrée meeting PCRM's requirements. PCRM defined a healthful entrée as a breakfast, lunch, or dinner item that was low in fat, high in fiber, and cholesterol-free. This rating system puts a premium on vendors serving low-fat and vegetarian choices, healthful salads, and international cuisine.

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 discovered that healthful food has become more widely available at airports over the past year, with many cities making important improvements. Nine of the 12 airports reviewed this year improved their scores from 2003.

Miami, which took first place in the current review, scored 85 percent, up from 68 percent last year. Also making notable improvements were Dallas and New York's JFK, which both increased their scores by 16 points. Detroit has made steady gains, rising from 33 percent in 2001 to 70 percent in 2003 and coming in second place at 83 percent this year.

Minneapolis won this year's "most improved airport" award by gaining 20 points from 2003, although the airport still scored a barely passing 54 percent.

But PCRM also identified some airports that health-conscious travelers may wish to avoid, if possible. Nutritious entrées are few and far between in Phoenix, which scored 44 percent, and in Las Vegas, which scored 33 percent.

Detailed Review

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

1. Miami International Airport (85 percent): Miami rose 17 points and moved into first place in this year's review. Travelers facing layovers or delayed flights will find many healthful options here. 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. Other healthy options include Casa Bacardi's grilled veggie sandwich and the vegetable roll at Sushi To Go.

2. Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport (83 percent): Detroit's consistent improvement since 2001 has now landed the airport in second place. With last year's implementation of a "Heart Smart" nutrition plan—an ambitious effort to improve airport food—Detroit achieved a 13-point increase from 2003. Travelers can now choose from such healthful options as the vegetarian stir-fry and almond rice salad at the Mediterranean Grill, tabouli wraps at the Original Airport Café, and veggie fajitas at Diego's Mexican Village.

3. Denver International Airport (78 percent): Although Denver managed a third-place finish in this year's review, the airport actually dropped five points from 2003. However, many satisfying, cholesterol-free choices are still available here. Highlights include the portabello mushroom sandwich at Lefty's Colorado Trails Bar and Grill and the vegetable tacos at Cantina Grille.

4. Chicago O'Hare International Airport (75 percent): Chicago continues to add more healthy choices to its menus, thereby gaining four points from 2003. One interesting addition this year is Eat A Leaf Salad Creations, an eatery that allows patrons to select a salad from the menu or create a custom salad from many healthy options, including garbanzo beans, jicama, and mandarin oranges. In addition, roasted vegetable panini are still available at 15 of the airport's Starbucks locations, making a healthy meal easy to find.

5. John F. Kennedy International Airport (73 percent): New York's JFK has improved its score by 16 points from last year's review. While the terminals harbor five McDonald's restaurants, travelers can also locate such nutritious choices as the Tuscan portabello burger at Latitude and the vegetable sushi or the seaweed salad at Deep Blue Sushi.

6. Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport (64 percent): Atlanta's score has risen five 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 a few bright spots in the world's busiest airport. Atlanta Bread Company offers several healthful options, including vegetarian sandwiches, salads, and soups. Houlihan's menu includes an Asian vegetable wrap. Passengers not lucky enough to be near either of these restaurants can seek out one of the airport's five Burger Kings, where they can find a BK Veggie Burger (hold the mayo, please).

7. Newark Liberty International Airport (63 percent): Newark improved slightly this year, up from 60 percent in 2003. That score is still not impressive, but travelers do have some healthy options. Good choices include the veggie burrito and veggie taco at Maui Tacos, the green leaf salad at GreenLeaf's Grille, and the tofu and mixed vegetables at Asian Chao.

8. Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport (59 percent): Dallas gained 16 points this year by offering more low-fat, cholesterol-free options. Good choices include the vegetable wrap offered at the airport's six Au Bon Pain locations, the Strawberry Field Salad at T.G.I. Friday's, and the bean burrito at Los Amigos.

9. Minneapolis–St. Paul International Airport (54 percent): With a 20-point increase from 2003, Minneapolis improved more this year than any other airport. But the ninth-place ranking shows that the airport still has a long way to go. Some new additions this year include the grilled portabello mushroom wrap at all three Caribou Coffee locations, the veggie pita at Malibu Al's, and a variety of vegetarian soft tacos and burritos at Maui Taco.

10. Los Angeles International Airport (53 percent): For an airport this size, LAX offers astonishingly few healthful food options. Although Los Angeles improved its score by six points this year, travelers will still struggle to find healthful alternatives to McDonald's, Hot Dog Station, and other restaurants serving high-fat, high-cholesterol

foods. Better options include the vegetarian sandwiches at Old Town Bakery & Deli and the veggie burrito and fajita at El Paseo.

11. Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport (44 percent): Travelers trying to navigate Sky Harbor face a significant challenge to finding wholesome food among the airport’s six Pizza Hut outlets, Jodi Maroni’s Sausage Kingdom, and other unhealthful restaurants. Phoenix lost six points from last year, but a few healthful options remain. Kokopelli Deli offers a vegetarian sandwich and salad, and travelers with a lengthy layover can try the Gardenburger or the salad bar at Left Seat Restaurant.

12. Las Vegas McCarran International Airport (33 percent): After a dismal showing in 2003, Las Vegas has fallen even lower in this year’s review, losing five points and landing solidly in last place. The airport plays host to eight Pizza Hut outlets and 12 hot dog eateries, leaving passengers with few healthful options. Among the scarce alternatives are Prickly Pear Café’s veggie sandwich and Taco Bell’s bean burrito.

Table 1: Airport Scores in 2004

AIRPORT	SCORE	HEALTHY RESTAURANTS/ TOTAL RESTAURANTS
1. Miami International Airport	85%	40/47
2. Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport	83%	30/36
3. Denver International Airport	78%	28/36
4. Chicago O’Hare International Airport	75%	57/76
5. John F. Kennedy International Airport	73%	43/59
6. Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport	64%	45/70
7. Newark Liberty International Airport	63%	35/56
8. Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport	59%	35/59
9. Minneapolis–St. Paul International Airport	54%	27/50
10. Los Angeles International Airport	53%	29/55
11. Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport	44%	17/39
12. Las Vegas McCarran International Airport	33%	16/49

Table 2: Comparisons from Previous Reviews

AIRPORT	SCORE 2004	SCORE 2003	SCORE 2002	SCORE 2001
1. Miami International Airport	85%	68%	Not rated	Not rated
2. Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport	83%	70%	Not rated	33%
3. Denver International Airport	78%	83%	79%	61%
4. Chicago O'Hare International Airport	75%	71%	42%	64%
5. John F. Kennedy International Airport	73%	57%	Not rated	Not rated
6. Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport	64%	59%	49%	40%
7. Newark Liberty International Airport	63%	60%	Not rated	Not rated
8. Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport	59%	43%	53%	50%
9. Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport	54%	34%	44%	66%
10. Los Angeles International Airport	53%	47%	54%	60%
11. Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport	44%	50%	48%	58%
12. Las Vegas McCarran International Airport	33%	38%	45%	45%