

### 7 RD-Approved Side Dishes You Can Substitute for French Fries

Chaunie Brusie, BSN, RN | July 12, 2024



Need to skip the fries? Ask for your favorite vegetable to be grilled, steamed, or roasted instead.  
Debby Lewis-Harrison/Getty Images

Order a burger or a sandwich at a restaurant, and it will probably come with a side of French fries. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), a small serving of French fries contains 222 calories, a medium serving has 375, and a large serving packs 480. Along with being a high-calorie food, a typical serving of fast-food French fries has 14.7 grams (g) of saturated fat, which is higher than the American Heart Association’s recommended daily allotment of 13 g.

Now, let’s be honest, fries do sometimes hit the spot — but a lower-calorie side dish may support your weight loss efforts better.

“Many restaurants that offer the classic French fry side also offer French fry alternatives like side garden salads, fruit salads, or even soups,” says Jennifer Hernandez, a registered dietitian nutritionist based in Hollywood, Florida.

Not only can swapping French fries with a different side dish still please your palate, but doing it often might also provide you with more nutrients.

“When selecting side dishes, prioritize options that offer a balance of nutrients to complement your main meal,” suggests Maggie Bell, RD, RN of Little Rock, Arkansas, and owner of Maggie Bell: Nutrition and Wellness. “Experiment with different combinations to discover flavorful alternatives that align with your dietary preferences and health goals.”

With that in mind, check out these seven RD-approved side dishes that go beyond the deep fryer.

## 1. Grilled, Steamed, or Roasted Vegetable (Example: Brussels Sprouts)

- **Calories** 69.8
- **Fat** 0.48 g
- **Carbs** 14.4 g
- **Protein** 5.4 g
- **Fiber** 6.04 g

*Based on a 1-cup serving, per the USDA*

Substituting fries with a vegetable can make your meal much more nutritious. “Instead of French fries, ask for a vegetable that can be cooked in a delicious way,” Hernandez says, adding that Brussels sprouts, asparagus, or carrots can be great side dishes. As for the preparation, Hernandez suggests asking for your favorite vegetable to be grilled, steamed, or roasted, which can decrease the amount of calories and saturated fats typically used in sauteeing veggies with oil or butter.

A vegetable side can help keep you satiated, too. “I recommend incorporating at least one non-starchy vegetable into your meal when dining out,” adds Bell. According to the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, non-starchy vegetables decrease the spikes in your blood sugar that can increase hunger.

For an extra boost of flavor, you can add shaved Parmesan cheese on top of your veggie choice. One ounce (oz) of shaved Parmesan adds 89 calories, per the USDA. It also contains nearly 9 g of protein, so you get a nutrient boost.

Los Angeles–based registered dietitian and **Trimly** coach Kim Shapira also suggests asking for your veggies to come out first instead of a bread basket, so you can nosh healthfully while you wait for the main course.

## 2. Baked Potato

- **Calories** 131
- **Fat** 0.18 g
- **Carbs** 29.5 g
- **Protein** 3.6 g
- **Fiber** 3.2 g

*Based on a 1-cup serving, per the USDA*

When searching for a substitute for French fries, don’t overlook the humble baked potato. A baked potato is almost like magic — it will cook with no added oil, butter, or fats needed. “Potatoes are one of my favorite foods,” says Shapira.

You can either “dress up” or “dress down” a regular baked potato, says Doreen Bevans, an Orlando-based nutrition educator for the SNAP-Ed program at Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida. Bevans suggests dressing it up with a drizzle of olive oil, chopped chives, and a dollop of low-fat or nonfat yogurt for approximately 160 to 170 more calories. At a total of around 400 calories with the potato itself, this is less than a large side of French fries, per the USDA, and you’ll avoid the saturated fats that fries contain. (The USDA lists about 1 g of saturated fat in 4 tbsp of low-fat yogurt, while a large side of fries has 3.6 g.)

Swapping saturated fats for unsaturated fats can help you lose weight and reduce body fat, according to research, even without changing your diet or activity.

Potatoes also help fill you up. One study found that meals containing potatoes far outranked rice or pasta for satiety.

### 3. Salad Greens

- **Calories** 5.6
- **Fat** 0.078 g
- **Carbs** 1.03 g
- **Protein** 0.56 g
- **Fiber** 0.49 g

*Based on a 1-cup serving with no dressing, per the USDA*

Many people who want to eat healthier order a side salad instead of French fries to cut down on calories. But to achieve this benefit, you need to be mindful of the dressing you use. Hernandez suggests ordering a vinaigrette instead of a creamy dressing, which can add calories (not to mention fat). For example, ranch dressing has 129 calories and a little over 2 g of saturated fat in a 2-tablespoon (tbsp) serving, per the USDA, while the same-size serving of balsamic vinaigrette contains 90 calories and just under 1 g of saturated fat, according to the USDA.

### 4. Vegetable Soup

- **Calories** 88.9
- **Fat** 2 g
- **Carbs** 14.5 g
- **Protein** 4.16 g
- **Fiber** 2.8 g

*Based on a 1-cup serving, per the USDA*

Vegetable soup serves as another lower-calorie option instead of fries. Not all soups are made the same way, but Hernandez likes opting for a broth-based soup with plenty of veggies whenever possible because creamy soups often have ingredients like fat, sodium, and perhaps fewer veggies than you’d prefer. “Adding a veggie-packed salad or soup can be a great way

to get more nutrients, like fiber, that will help fill you up,” she notes. Research shows adults should eat at least 25 g to 30 g of fiber every day for optimum health, especially digestive health.

## 5. Mashed Cauliflower With Cheese

- **Calories** 39.6
- **Fat** 2 g
- **Carbs** 5 g
- **Protein** 2 g
- **Fiber** 1.98 g

*Based on a 1-cup serving, per the USDA*

Bevans suggests asking your server if the kitchen can whip up a side of steamed cauliflower mashed with cheese and garlic as a healthy side dish alternative to fries. A 1-cup serving is approximately 40 calories and contains a nice balance of protein and carbs, as well as nutrients like vitamin K, calcium, potassium, and magnesium, according to the USDA.

## 6. Fruit Salad

- **Calories** 120
- **Fat** 0 g
- **Carbs** 31 g
- **Protein** 0 g
- **Fiber** 2 g

*Based on a 1.4-ounce prepackaged serving, per the USDA*

Who says a salad has to contain lettuce? Hernandez enjoys swapping her side order of fries for a fruit salad. Even a prepackaged fruit salad can be a lower-calorie option than French fries and provide additional nutrients like vitamin C.

While choosing local and seasonal fresh fruit can help support local farmers and may boost nutritional value, research shows that even canned or frozen fruit provides extra nutrients. (Avoid canned fruit in syrup if you’re watching your sugar intake, however.)

## 7. Sweet Potato

- **Calories** 112
- **Fat** 0.065 g
- **Carbs** 26.1 g
- **Protein** 2 g
- **Fiber** 3.9 g

*Based on one 5-inch sweet potato, per the USDA*

The most nutritious way to enjoy a sweet potato is to steam and eat it plain. However, Bell shares that her preferred alternative to French fries is a sweet potato topped with butter, sour cream, cheese, and bacon bits.

“This option provides a satisfying blend of sweet and savory flavors,” she says. These toppings do add extra calories and fat — according to the USDA, 1 tbsp of butter adds 100 calories and 11.4 g of fat, while the USDA lists 2 tbsp of sour cream as having 60 calories and nearly 3 g of fat. As for the bacon bits, the USDA reports 33 calories and 2 g of fat. Yet, even with those toppings, it adds up to 305 calories and 16.4 g of fat, which is less than a medium or large side of fries, per the USDA.

A 5-inch sweet potato also contains 3.9 g of fiber. High-fiber foods such as sweet potatoes can help reduce overeating by helping you feel fuller, according to the Mayo Clinic.

## **Bonus: French Fries**

- **Calories** 222
- **Fat** 10.4 g
- **Carbs** 29.4 g
- **Protein** 2.4 g
- **Fiber** 2.7 g

*Based on one serving (size small), per the USDA*

Yup, that’s right — sometimes, if you want the French fries, you should just eat the French fries. “Eating is all about balance,” says Hernandez. “You can still eat the French fries. Include them alongside your meal that has all the nutrients you need.”

To help achieve this, Bell recommends pairing your French fries (which are high in carbohydrates) with a healthy protein and fat source. This will help you avoid spikes in your blood sugar and keep you feeling fuller and more energized throughout the day, says Bell. Research has also found that pairing carbs with a high-protein source (egg, in this study) helps balance and stabilize blood sugar levels, including in people with type 2 diabetes.

Finally, you don’t need to make French fries the enemy. Instead, you can make food choices to satisfy your cravings along with others that supply important nutrition. “I think it’s important to have a variety of foods available,” Shapira says. “You’ll be more satisfied and less likely to overeat one food.” In fact, research suggests that short-term food deprivation will only increase food cravings.

## **The Wrap-Up**

Experimenting with different side dishes not only keeps your meals exciting, but also ensures you get a variety of essential nutrients. By making thoughtful choices, such as opting for vegetables or nutrient-rich alternatives, you can create a balanced and satisfying dining experience. Just remember to find the right balance that meets your nutritional needs and satisfies your taste buds. This will help you to enjoy your meals fully while supporting your health goals.

<https://www.loseit.com/articles/rd-approved-side-dishes-you-can-substitute-for-french-fries/>