

# Boston Firefighters Digest



International Association of Fire Fighters Local 718  
Professional Fire Fighters of Massachusetts  
Massachusetts AFL-CIO • Greater Boston Labor Council



Dedicated to the advancement of the moral, economic and social standing of the members of the Boston Fire Department in keeping with the dignity of their heroic calling.

## What's Cooking at the Firehouse? Healthier Eating Leads to Fit Firefighters

by Kate Scarlata, RD, LDN,  
BFD Medical Examiner's Office

The firehouse of Engine Company 8, Ladder 1 is situated on Hanover Street at the corner of Charter Street in the North End, amongst narrow streets and restaurants, an area well known for its tight-knit Italian community. And what do Italians do to show their appreciation of a job well done? Being married into an Italian family, I can tell you; they bear gifts of great tasting food. A firehouse is an integral part of every community, and at Engine 8, Ladder 1, you will likely never leave your call of duty on an empty stomach.

Of course, there are firehouses and hungry firefighters all over the city of Boston. Mealtime at the firehouse is more than just eating food. And feeding a large hungry crowd nightly can be a big task. Jim, one of my BFD clients tells me, "Nutrition is not the major consideration when it comes to dinner, but there is always enough food for everyone to eat and be full. When danger is part of your life, why worry about tomorrow? It's fairly common to find three 2-liter bottles of soda and ice cream at every evening meal." Jim notes, "Most of us get plenty of sugar." Another firefighter affirms that mealtime at the firehouse is not over the top without regard to health, in fact, he adds, "in the old days; it was beef, beef and more beef, today you see a whole lot more chicken. Most meals are healthy; we always have salad and vegetables. Where we go wrong is the volume. We cook large amounts and then eat large quantities."

As firefighters work to keep our community safe, how can the medical community in turn, help keep our firefighters safe from poor health and chronic disease? As a nutritionist that consults with many Boston firefighters, it's my hope that small changes in meal preparation, food choices and eating habits at the firehouse will translate to healthier firefighters. It is amazing how subtle changes in the diet can accomplish positive health outcomes. One firefighter told me after great success losing weight and lowering his blood pressure, "You just need to lead us to water and we'll drink." So here is my attempt to lead you to water...

Let's start with a quick lunchtime scenario, from what I hear; the sub shops near the firehouses have no shortage of business! Unfortunately, fast food shops often fall short on good nutrition. Consider bringing a healthy lunch from home versus grabbing an Italian sub on the run. A turkey sandwich has 300 calories while a small Italian sub often contains 600-800 calories. Of course, an occasional sub sandwich is a nice treat, but regular trips to the sub shop are not very artery friendly.

Here is a sample lunch menu from one of the firehouses: ham and cheese on the grill with butter, tomato soup, potato chips, and milk. All items on this menu add up to a big sodium overload! This meal tops off at 2,300 milligrams sodium; that's over the daily limit in just one meal! You

might as well shake a salt-shaker directly into your mouth! In Boston, on any given tour, eight out of ten firefighters have hypertension. That makes this salt-rich lunch a job hazard.

Simple tweaks to this menu can keep your blood pressure safer. For starters consider substituting the ham with sliced tomato, and purchase one of the lower sodium varieties of tomato soup such as Campbell's Healthy Request Soups, which have 50% less sodium. Since 20 potato chips contain 150 calories, 10 grams of fat and 180 milligrams of sodium, why not eliminate them altogether? And since it is hard to stop at just 20 chips, you likely save even more calories and salt!

For dinnertime meal planning at the firehouse, consider trying some of my menu *tweaks and swaps* in the chart below for better health. The menus provided on the next page are actual dinners that have been served at a Boston firehouse recently.

A few more tips for healthier eating at the firehouse:

- Fill a basket of fruit and leave it on the table each and every day.
- Opt for *one or occasionally two* carbohydrate rich food choices per meal such as: bread, peas, corn, potato, pasta or rice. Fill up with low carbohydrate vegetables such as salad, carrots, broccoli, green beans, peppers and onions, zucchini, summer squash, bell peppers, mushrooms, onions or spinach.
- Consider fruit oriented desserts such as: fruit salad, strawberry shortcake, angel cake with blueberries, berry or apple crisp, or purchase more heart friendly brownie mixes such as the No Pudge brand. Do without the jarred/canned frosting which contain the dangerous heart clogging trans fats.
- Bring a box of kashi granola bars, roasted unsalted almonds and fruit for midday snacks.
- Consider eliminating dessert-at least occasionally! Put the extra money into the main entrée like fresh fish, shrimp, or lean steak.
- Cook what you need, not extras. If there are 14 guys, cook up 14 potatoes, not a 10 lb. bag!
- Choose whole grain breads, rice and pasta over white at least occasionally.
- Drink more water, less soda. Regular soda has 10 teaspoon equivalents of sugar and is sweetened with high fructose corn syrup which can contribute to a fatty liver.
- 4 to 6 ounces of meat per person is enough, purchase accordingly.

Good nutrition starts with small changes. Do your fellow firefighter a favor and encourage healthy foods and reasonable portions to be served at the firehouse.



Sample Firehouse Dinner	What's Good?	Menu Tweak and Swaps
Meatloaf Mashed potato (made with 1 pound of butter) Canned peas Canned corn Salad Frosted Cake with canned frosting 1 or 2 % milk	Overall nice balanced meal! Lots of vegetables, which makes it nutrient rich.	Use 90% lean beef or mix in some ground chicken breast.  Roast the potatoes.  A pound of butter has 3,240 calories while 1/2 cup oil in the roasted potatoes has 963 calories.  Choose frozen vegetables over canned or use no added salt canned vegetables. A cup of canned Green Giant corn has 500 milligrams of sodium vs. 15 milligrams in the <i>no added salt</i> frozen or canned variety. <i>Always check the ingredients listed and choose the vegetables that do not contain added salt!</i>  Choose one to two carbohydrate-rich vegetable choices per meal. Corn, peas, potatoes, and winter squash are all starchy vegetables. (These have 3x as many calories as lower carbohydrate-rich vegetables)  Substitute low carb. veggies such as: carrots, broccoli, green beans, zucchini, and summer squash to name a few.  Canned frosting has <b>trans fats</b> , which are the unhealthiest of all dietary fats. Instead try No Pudge Brownies, Angel Cake, fudgsicles, or sherbet!
Roast Beef Mashed Potatoes Carrots Green Beans Brownies 1% milk	Again, nice job with the vegetables. Lots of color at this meal making it a healthier one. Beef is a good source of iron.	Choose lean cuts or trim excess fat off of roast beef.  Make mashed potatoes with 1 or 2 sticks of butter and add in some College Inn light chicken broth for flavor without the fat. Use red skin potatoes and mash skins into mixture this will add fiber and other healthy nutrients.  Choose no added salt frozen green beans and carrots. No Pudge brownies or substitute angel cake with strawberries and a bit of whip cream – no fake ingredients here!!
Spaghetti with meatballs and sausage Garlic Bread Salad Milk Brownies		Try to substitute regular sausage with chicken sausage to save a bunch of fat calories. Consider mixing in some whole-wheat pasta for fiber.  Don't overdue the butter on the garlic bread, it tastes good, yes, but loads on the fat and calories.  Salad – go easy on the dressing. Choose Italian or Vinaigrette vs. creamy dressings.
Fish baked with bread crumbs and butter Broccoli Corn Mashed potatoes Garlic bread Ice cream	Fish is a great choice, good for your brain and heart!	This meal is a carbohydrate overload: bread crumbs, corn, potatoes and bread all very rich in carbohydrates. To create more balance to this meal, delete the garlic bread. For portion control on the dessert, try fudgsicles or ice cream sandwiches versus scooping out more ice cream than you need.
Baked Chicken Roasted potatoes Carrots Salad Cake with frosting	Overall good meal with baked (not fried –Yeah!) chicken and lots of veggies.	Consider purchasing a few sweet potatoes and chopping them up with the white potato. Sweet potatoes are rich in Vitamin A and lutein, which are key for a healthy immune system and eye health.  Instead of trans fat filled frosting, what about apple or berry crisp? Fruit seems lacking at dinner and this is a sweet way to enjoy it.