Many single entrées at U.S. chain restaurants serve up masses of calories, fat, and sodium. Just how bad is a full meal?

Most Americans eat out at least once a week, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. So they might be dismayed to learn that 96 percent of the entrées from more than 200 chain restaurants contain more calories, fat, and sodium than should be consumed in one sitting. (This finding applies to any adult who eats three roughly nutritionally equivalent meals a day and hopes to stay within U.S. dietary guidelines for a daily 2,000-calorie diet.) Equally distressing? The fact that items consumed before and after entrées—such as specialty drinks, appetizers, sides, and desserts—substantially increase the counts. Using the average nutritional values calculated by RAND researchers for each item type, our fictional four-course meal illustrates just how easy it is to consume many times more nutrients than most of us need.