



The Five Worst Supposedly “Healthy” Fast-Food Items

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As a growing number of consumers look for nutritious quick-service dining options, fast-food companies are hawking salads, oatmeal, and other seemingly healthful choices. But many of these items are actually far from nutritious. To help consumers understand which supposedly healthy fast-food items are actually nutritional nightmares, dietitians with the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM) analyzed so-called “healthy” items from major fast-food chains.

Findings

PCRM dietitians found that some fast-food items advertised as healthy choices are actually high in fat, cholesterol, sugar, or sodium. Some are unhealthy in other respects. For example, some contain processed meats or grilled chicken, both of which can increase cancer risk. Here are the five worst “healthy” fast-food items:

Five Worst “Healthy” Fast-Food Items	Nutritional Shocker
Wendy’s Baja Salad	1,990 milligrams of sodium—more than most people should consume in an entire day.
McDonald’s Fruit & Maple Oatmeal	More sugar than a Snickers Bar.
Subway Fresh Fit 6” Turkey Breast Sub	With standards such as cheese and mayo, this “low-fat” sandwich jumps to 24 grams of fat. Contains processed meat, which is linked to increased cancer risk.
Sonic Strawberry Smoothie	More sugar than five Twinkies.
KFC Kentucky Grilled Chicken	Contains PhIP, a chemical classified as a carcinogen by the federal government.

Review Process

In March 2011, dietitians with PCRM began to research items that national fast-food companies are marketing as healthy or nutritious.

Dietitians obtained nutrition information and information about marketing claims by reviewing company websites. They evaluated each item based on key nutritional data, including the item's calories, total fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, sodium, and sugar. The results also reflect whether the product contains processed meats or grilled meats, which can increase cancer risk.

Detailed Results

Wendy's Baja Salad

Wendy's Baja Salad contains a meat-based chili, two kinds of cheese, fried tortilla strips, and a cheese-based jalapeño dressing smothering a few leafy greens. It derives nearly 60 percent of its calories from fat. In addition to the two types of shredded cheese covering the salad greens, the tortilla strips contain cheddar cheese, buttermilk powder, and other dairy products.

One Baja Salad contains 47 grams of fat, 17 in the form of saturated fat. That is more saturated fat than the American Heart Association recommends consuming in an entire day. Saturated fat clogs the arteries and can greatly increase the risk of cardiovascular disease and diabetes. It also promotes weight gain. The Wendy's Baja Salad also contains a shocking 1,990 milligrams of sodium—more than most people should consume in an entire day.

McDonald's Fruit & Maple Oatmeal

Oats are high in fiber and have been shown to lower cholesterol and support heart health. But when PCRM dietitians took a look at the nutrition facts and ingredients in McDonald's new offering, they saw a different picture.

The Fruit & Maple Oatmeal, which McDonald's markets as a healthy alternative to the usual high-calorie fast-food breakfast, is full of cream, sugar, natural flavor, and other ingredients. As a result, it contains more calories than a McDonald's hamburger. It also has 32 grams of sugar—more than can be found in many candy bars.

Subway's 6" Turkey Breast Sub

Subway markets the Turkey Breast Sub as a Fresh Fit "better-for-you" choice. But PCRM dietitians point out that the sandwich contains processed meat. Consumers generally think of turkey as a healthful alternative to red meat, but scientific studies have linked all processed meats, including cold cuts, to increased colorectal cancer risk.

Also, while Subway pushes this and a few other subs as sandwiches with less than 6 grams of fat, the nutrition facts do not include cheese, mayonnaise, or other high-fat condiments. It's likely that consumers believe these subs are under 6 grams of fat even with their favorite condiments. But add mayo to this sub and the fat content shoots up to nearly 16 grams. Add oil and cheese to that, and this sub goes to 24 grams of fat—more than the chain's 6" Big Philly Cheesesteak.

Sonic Strawberry Smoothie

Sonic says this smoothie is “like drinking the strawberry patch” and lists it as a “balanced choice.” But while the smoothie is fat-free, the regular size (the smallest size option) contains 542 calories and 99 grams of sugar. That's more sugar than can be found in five Twinkies.

The smoothie also contains dairy products, which Sonic says are added to provide calcium. While calcium is important for bone health, dairy products are not the best source. Clinical research shows that dairy products actually have little or no benefit for bones. A 2005 review published in *Pediatrics* showed that milk consumption does not improve bone integrity in children. Dairy products have been linked to increased risk of prostate cancer and other health problems.

KFC Kentucky Grilled Chicken

When fast-food giant Kentucky Fried Chicken began aggressively marketing grilled chicken as “the better-for-you chicken for health-conscious customers,” many consumers believed this to be a nutritious alternative to the chain's high-fat fried chicken. But each 4-ounce grilled chicken breast contains 105 grams of cholesterol and 460 milligrams of sodium. Nearly 107 million Americans have blood cholesterol levels more than 200, and high intakes of saturated fat and cholesterol play a key role in this serious healthy problem.

Kentucky Grilled Chicken poses another health risk. This product contains a carcinogen called PhIP, a chemical formed in meats that are grilled, panfried, barbecued, or otherwise heated to a sufficient degree. PhIP is linked to numerous cancers in humans, including breast, colon, and prostate. This carcinogen can bind to DNA and cause mutations—the first step in cancer development.