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**Cheap Eats for Hard Times:
The Five Most Unhealthy Fast Food “Value Menu” Items
A Report from The Cancer Project
Winter 2008**

As the stock market fluctuates and unemployment rates rise, more American consumers are pinching pennies and looking for bargains. Although the Value Menu items found at popular fast-food establishments seem like tempting choices in tough economic times, many of these cheap foods carry a hidden cost. The high-fat, high-cholesterol items that dominate Value Menus can increase the risk of heart disease, diabetes, and some types of cancer. To determine which Value Menu items pose the greatest risk to public health, dietitians with The Cancer Project analyzed foods served at five popular fast-food restaurant chains.

Findings

The Cancer Project found that most items advertised on Value Menus are high in fat, saturated fat, calories, sodium, and cholesterol. Many items also contain processed meats and grilled meats, which are linked to increased cancer risk. The five most unhealthy items were ranked from worst to least bad. Here are the five worst Value Menu items.

Rank	Worst Value Menu Item	Fast-Food Restaurant
1	Junior Bacon Cheeseburger	Jack in the Box
2	Cheesy Double Beef Burrito	Taco Bell
3	Breakfast Sausage Biscuit	Burger King
4	McDouble	McDonald's
5	Junior Bacon Cheeseburger	Wendy's

Detailed results can be found on page 5.

Background

Low prices have played a key role in fast-food marketing since Ray Kroc opened his first McDonald's restaurant in Des Plaines, Ill., in 1955. But the extremely low prices found on Value Menus are a recent phenomenon. In 1989, Wendy's began offering items on its menu for \$1. In the following decades, McDonald's, Burger King, and other fast-food chains followed suit.

Value Menus have helped increase the frequency of visits to fast-food restaurants. Fast food was long viewed by many consumers as a special treat. But some consumers today eat all three meals outside the home, and heavily marketed Value Menus have played a key role in that behavioral shift, which has greatly increased sales at many chains. Five years after the inception of McDonald's Dollar Menu, for example, revenue had increased about \$5 billion.¹ However, these financial gains for fast-food companies have come at a significant cost to public health.

The main targets of Value Menu marketing efforts are teenagers, young adults, and minorities, according to a 2005 report from the Institute of Medicine on marketing of junk food. African-Americans and Hispanics, populations at higher risk of obesity, type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular disease, are core customers for these unhealthy offerings, which increase the danger of chronic diseases.

Review Process

In October 2008, dietitians with The Cancer Project reviewed Value Menus at five of the largest fast-food chains in the United States. Value Menus evaluated ranged from the traditional Dollar Menu at McDonald's to Jack in the Box's Jack's Value Menu (prices start at 99 cents and vary by market), Taco Bell's Why Pay More! Value Menu (prices range from 79 cents to 99 cents) and the Wendy's and Burger King Value Menus (prices range from 99 cents to \$1.79).

Dietitians obtained menu information by reviewing company Web sites, contacting restaurants by phone, and visiting restaurants near The Cancer Project's headquarters in Washington, D.C. Because some fast-food chains offer different Value Menu items at different prices in different regions of the country, the items compiled for this analysis represent only a sampling of these foods and may not be available at all locations. The Cancer Project then used company Web sites to obtain nutrition information and ingredients.

Dietitians evaluated each Value Menu item based on key nutritional data, including the item's calories, total fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, sodium, and fiber. Ratings are also based on carcinogenic criteria: These include preparation methods such as grilling and processing, which can increase the cancer risk associated with meat products, and the addition of cheese and other high-fat dairy products, which appear to play an important role in cancer risk.

Key Factors

Here is more detailed information about the factors that played a key role in The Cancer Project's evaluation process:

High fat content: Diets high in fat, especially saturated fat, have been linked by scientific research to increased risk of cancers,² diabetes,³ and heart disease.⁴ High-fat, low-fiber foods boost the hormones that promote cancer. Specifically, diets high in meat, dairy products, fried foods, and vegetable oils cause an increase in the production of estrogen. Extra estrogen increases cancer risk in the breast and other organs sensitive to sex hormones.

Grilled meat: Grilling some animal products, including chicken, beef, pork, and fish, can produce cancer-causing compounds called heterocyclic amines (HCAs). In August 2005, nutrition professionals with The Cancer Project reported on the level of HCAs found in commonly grilled foods. To read "The Five Worst Foods to Grill" report, visit www.CancerProject.org. Grilling is particularly prone to forming carcinogens because the process involves two of the most important contributing factors: high heat and long cooking times.

Processed meats: Consuming processed meats—including hot dogs, pepperoni, bacon, and deli meats—is a key risk factor for colorectal cancer, according to a comprehensive report released in 2007 by the American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR) and the World Cancer Research Fund. After reviewing 58 published studies on nutrition and cancer risk, AICR scientists concluded that processed meats increase one's risk of colorectal cancer by an average of 21 percent for every 50 grams of processed meat consumed daily. A 50-gram serving is approximately the size of a typical hot dog.

Dairy products: Dairy products, including milk, cheese, and yogurt, are typically loaded with fat and cholesterol, and researchers are discovering that dairy products appear to play an important role in cancer risk. Dairy products have been shown to influence premenopausal breast cancer as well as prostate cancer.^{5,6,7} When humans drink cow's milk, it causes biological changes in the body, including a rise in the amount of insulin-like growth factor 1 (IGF-1) in the bloodstream.^{8,9} IGF-1 is a powerful stimulus for cancer cell growth. In addition, milk appears to interfere with the activation of vitamin D in the body. Vitamin D helps the body absorb calcium from the digestive tract. It also protects the prostate against cancer.

Fiber: Diets high in fiber and low in fat help reduce the amount of estrogen circulating in the blood. Fiber is also important in preventing colon cancer, as it helps move food waste, extra hormones, and carcinogens out of the body. Fiber may even help the immune system function properly. Building a diet from fiber-rich plant foods is important for cancer prevention and survival, as well as overall health. Most Americans do not get enough fiber, and one key reason is that many commonly consumed dishes contain little or no fiber. On average,

Americans currently consume only about half the recommended 35 grams to 40 grams of fiber per day.

Sodium: Diets high in sodium can increase the risk of high blood pressure, a condition that can lead to cardiovascular disease and kidney problems. Sodium intake should be limited to 2,400 milligrams per day. This is equivalent to one teaspoon of salt. Fast foods often contain large amounts of sodium.

Fruits and vegetables: Diets rich in fruits and vegetables can reduce the risk of cancer, heart disease, and other health problems. Fruits and vegetables contain phytochemicals, which are chemical compounds found only in plants that have been shown to reduce inflammation and prevent the damage of free radicals circulating in the body. Free radicals cause cellular damage that eventually may lead to cancer.

Rating System

With these health-based criteria in mind, The Cancer Project ranked all Value Menu offerings at each eatery. Items with the most points were ranked as the least healthful.

Points were given if the menu item had the following:

- Grilled meat/fish/poultry: 1 point for every grilled item
- Processed meats: 1 point for every processed meat item
- High-fat dairy: 1 point for every high-fat dairy item
- More than 300 calories (1 point) or 400 calories or more (2 points)
- More than 10 grams of fat (1 point) or 20 grams of fat or more (2 points)
- More than 2.5 grams of saturated fat (1 point) or more than 5 grams of saturated fat (2 points)
- Cholesterol: 1 point
- Less than 3 grams of fiber: 1 point
- More than 400 milligrams of sodium (1 point) or more than 1,000 milligrams of sodium (2 points)
- No fruit or vegetable serving (onion and pickles do not count, but lettuce, tomato or any significant fruit or vegetable do): 1 point

Using these scores, Cancer Project dietitians then chose the five worst Value Menu items from all fast-food establishments combined. To break a tie between the new McDouble from McDonald's and the Junior Bacon Cheeseburger at Wendy's, these two items were further compared by ranking nutritional criteria—total fat, saturated fat, calories, and sodium—from highest to lowest. Based on those factors, the McDouble was named the fourth-worst Value Menu item, with the Junior Bacon Cheeseburger taking fifth place.

Detailed Results

Junior Bacon Cheeseburger (Jack in the Box)

Rank: Worst value menu item

Overall score: 14

Price: \$1

400 calories, 23 grams of fat, 8 grams of saturated fat, 1 gram of trans fat, 55 milligrams of cholesterol, 860 milligram of sodium, 1 gram of fiber, processed meat, grilled beef, high-fat dairy

The Junior Bacon Cheeseburger costs a dollar, but consumers who make it a regular part of their diet might end up paying a pretty penny in healthcare costs. This sandwich, which contains a beef patty, two strips of bacon, cheese, and mayonnaise, has just 1 gram of health-promoting fiber, but it weighs in at 400 calories and 23 grams of fat, including 8 grams of saturated fat and 1 gram of trans fat. The beef patty is grilled, which exposes consumers to cancer-causing compounds called heterocyclic amines. Bacon, like all processed meats, is associated with increased colorectal cancer risk.

Cheesy Double Beef Burrito (Taco Bell)

Rank: Second-worst value menu item

Score: 13

Price: 89 cents

460 calories, 20 grams of fat, 7 grams of saturated fat, 1.5 grams of trans fat, 40 milligrams of cholesterol, 1,620 milligrams of sodium, 5 grams of fiber, processed meat, high-fat dairy

This burrito contains a double helping of processed beef, as well as nacho cheese sauce, seasoned rice, and red sauce. It weighs in at 20 grams of fat, including 7 grams of saturated fat, as well as 460 calories. It also offers an astonishing 1,620 milligrams of sodium—more than two-thirds the recommended daily maximum. The high levels of sodium commonly found in fast food can contribute to high blood pressure and calcium loss from bones.

Breakfast Sausage Biscuit (Burger King)

Rank: Third-worst value menu item

Score: 12

Price: \$1

420 calories, 27 grams of fat, 15 grams of saturated fat, 0.5 gm trans fat, 35 milligrams of cholesterol, 1,090 milligrams of sodium, 1 gram of fiber, processed meat

The Breakfast Sausage Biscuit might be the worst possible choice for the most important meal of the day. It contains 27 grams of fat, including 15 grams of saturated fat, as well as 420 calories and 1,090 milligrams of sodium. The sausage patty, like all processed meat products, can increase the risk of colorectal cancer. The Breakfast Sausage Biscuit also lacks the cancer-fighting

fiber and antioxidants provided by a more sensible breakfast of oatmeal topped with nuts and berries.

McDouble (McDonald's)

Rank: Fourth-worst value menu items

Score: 11 points

Price \$1

390 calories, 19 grams of fat, 8 grams of saturated fat, 1 gram of trans fat, 65 milligrams of cholesterol, 920 milligrams of sodium, 2 grams of fiber, high-fat dairy

The McDouble, which recently replaced the Double Cheeseburger on McDonald's Dollar Menu, is a double disaster that derives more than 43 percent of its calories from fat. This sandwich, which contains two beef patties and one slice of cheese, has 65 milligrams of cholesterol, 42 percent of the recommended daily value of artery-clogging saturated fat, and 38 percent of the recommended daily value of sodium.

Junior Bacon Cheeseburger (Wendy's)

Rank: Fifth-worst value menu item

Score: 11 points

Price: \$1.53

310 calories, 16 grams of fat, 6 grams of saturated fat, .5 grams of trans fat, 50 milligrams of cholesterol, 670 milligrams of sodium, 1 gram of fiber, processed meat, high-fat dairy

Covered with high-fat cheese and mayonnaise, Wendy's Junior Bacon Cheeseburger is packed with cholesterol and derives 46 percent of its calories from fat. It also features two strips of hickory-smoked bacon, a processed meat product that can increase the risk of colorectal cancer. Wendy's also offers the Double Stack, a sandwich with two beef patties. If the Double Stack is ordered with optional extras, including cheese sauce and three strips of bacon, it's actually more unhealthy than the Junior Bacon Cheeseburger—but those options cost extra.

Cheap and Healthful Options

Eating healthfully can be quick, easy, affordable, and delicious, so consumers do not have to settle for fast foods that compromise their health.

Here are some cheap and healthful alternatives. At Burger King, a BK Veggie offers a low-fat, low-cholesterol option that costs only 90 cents more than the Whopper Jr. At Taco Bell, a bean burrito without cheese is just 99 cents and contains no cholesterol and very little fat. At many restaurants, a bean burrito can be made more healthful by adding rice or vegetables to increase the amount of fiber and disease-fighting phytochemicals.

Fast-food establishments are not the only stops for convenient meals. Grocery stores offer quick frozen options that can be just as tasty and much more healthful. Amy's Kitchen offers a line of frozen burritos that include beans and

rice or black beans and vegetables in whole wheat tortillas. While the cost is slightly more than some Value Menu items, paying \$2.55 will provide a low-fat, zero-cholesterol meal with 4 grams of satisfying fiber.

If more preparation time is available, consumers can make a brown-bag meal that is healthful and cost-effective. Combining a can of pinto beans, tortillas, rice, and salsa creates a delicious treat that only costs \$1.22 per serving.

Ingredient	Total Cost	Servings	Cost per Serving
Tortillas	\$2.99	8	\$0.37
Pinto Beans (15.5 ounces)	\$0.99	3.5	\$0.28
Brown Rice	\$5.99	22	\$0.27
Salsa (15.5 ounces)	\$3.89	13	\$0.30
		TOTAL COST PER SERVING:	\$1.22

For other quick, healthy, delicious and affordable meal ideas and recipes, visit www.CancerProject.org.

References

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⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Giovannucci E, Rimm EB, Wolk A, et al. Calcium and fructose intake in relation to risk of prostate cancer. *Cancer Res.* 1998;58:442-447

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