



5100 WISCONSIN AVE., N.W., SUITE 400
WASHINGTON, DC 20016
PHONE: 202-244-5038
FAX: 202-686-2216
WWW.CANCERPROJECT.ORG

Advancing cancer prevention and survival through nutrition education and research.

The Five Most Unhealthy Gourmet Burgers

A Report from The Cancer Project

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As shrinking food budgets and rising unemployment levels push consumers away from full-service dining, a growing number of fast-food restaurants are offering gourmet burgers made with expensive types of beef and premium toppings such as Swiss cheese. Although high-end burgers may seem like a cheap way to enjoy a premium meal, these high-fat, high-cholesterol items can increase the risk of heart disease, diabetes, and some types of cancer. To determine which gourmet burgers pose the greatest risk to consumers' health, The Cancer Project analyzed premium items sold by five large fast-food chains.

Findings

The Cancer Project's dietitians found that some fast-food gourmet burgers contain more fat, saturated fat, trans fat, and sodium than a person should consume in an entire day. All are high in calories, and many contain bacon and high-fat dairy products, both of which can increase cancer risk. The five most unhealthy items were ranked from worst to least bad. Here are the five worst fast-food gourmet burgers:

Rank	Worst Gourmet Burger	Fast-Food Restaurant
1	Bacon Deluxe Triple	Wendy's
2	The Guacamole Bacon Six Dollar Burger	Carl's Jr.
3	Steakhouse XT Burger	Burger King
4	Sirloin Cheeseburger	Jack in the Box
5	Angus Bacon and Cheese	McDonald's

Detailed analysis of all five burgers can be found on page 5.

Background

The gourmet burger trend was born in 2001 when French chef Daniel Boulud rolled out the db Burger, a sirloin stuffed with short ribs and foie gras that sold for \$32. Full-service and fast-food restaurants in the United States quickly latched onto the trend. In 2004, the fast-food industry assisted in a public relations campaign to promote the supposedly superior quality of meat from Angus cattle. Burger King's Angus Burger was one of the first fast-food gourmet burgers to appear in the American marketplace.

Many analysts believe that the recent economic downturn has actually increased the popularity of gourmet fast-food items. Unable to afford budget-busting meals at full-service restaurants, consumers are making more trips to the drive-through window. But many people do not downscale all the way to the dollar menu, so fast-food restaurants are cashing in by offering gourmet burgers to bargain-hunting consumers with premium tastes.

In addition to the higher price tag, these burgers come at a nutritional cost. With high levels of saturated fat, sodium, and cholesterol, they put consumers at increased risk of diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and other obesity-related problems, as well as some forms of cancer.

Review Process

In October 2009, dietitians with The Cancer Project began to research gourmet burgers offered by national fast-food companies. The five most prominent fast-food chains selling these burgers were Burger King, Carl's Jr., Jack in the Box, McDonald's, and Wendy's.

Dietitians obtained menu information by reviewing company Web sites, visiting restaurants near The Cancer Project's headquarters in Washington, D.C., and contacting restaurants located out of state by phone. Price information was obtained at locations in D.C. and Austin, Texas, and may vary. The dietitians used the nutritional information provided on each company's Web site.

Dietitians evaluated each burger based on key nutritional data, including the item's calories, total fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, sodium, and fiber. Ratings also reflect whether the product contains processed meats such as bacon, which are linked to increased risk of colorectal cancer, or high-fat dairy products, which appear to play an important role in cancer risk.

Key Factors

The Cancer Project dietitians looked at several key factors to determine the healthfulness of each burger:

Processed Meat: Consuming processed meats—including deli meats, hot dogs, and bacon—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—or a little less than the four slices of bacon found on the Wendy’s Bacon Deluxe burger.

High-Fat Dairy: Dairy products 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. When humans drink cow’s milk, it causes biological changes, including a rise in the amount of insulin-like growth factor 1 (IGF-1) in the bloodstream. IGF-1 is a powerful stimulus for cancer cell growth. In addition, milk appears to interfere with the body’s activation of vitamin D, which helps the body absorb calcium from the digestive tract and protects against prostate cancer.

High Fat Content: Diets high in fat, especially saturated fat, have been linked by scientific research to increased risk of cancers, diabetes, and heart disease. 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. Trans fats raise LDL (“bad”) cholesterol levels and lower HDL (“good”) cholesterol levels, increasing the risk of cardiovascular disease.

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—the equivalent of about one teaspoon of salt—and some health experts suggest consuming even less.

Cholesterol: Cholesterol is a waxy substance found in the bloodstream and in the body’s cells. Every animal cell contains some of it. High blood-cholesterol levels are strongly linked to risk of heart disease. High levels of LDL (“bad”) cholesterol and low levels of HDL (“good”) cholesterol increase the risk of heart disease and stroke. Saturated fats and trans fats both increase LDL levels. Including large amounts of cholesterol in one’s diet may eventually lead to reduced heart function.

Low Fiber Content: High-fiber, low-fat diets 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. On average, Americans consume only about half the recommended 35 grams to 40 grams of fiber per day.

Rating System

With these health-based criteria in mind, The Cancer Project ranked all gourmet burger offerings at each of the five national chains surveyed in this report. Items with the most points were ranked as the least healthful.

Points were given if the menu item had the following:

- Processed meat: 1 point
- High-fat dairy: 1 point
- More than 700 calories (1 point); 800 calories (2 points); 900 calories (3 points); or 1,000 calories or more (4 points)
- More than 30 grams of fat (1 point); 40 grams of fat (2 points); 50 grams of fat (3 points); or 60 grams or more (4 points)
- More than 10 grams of saturated fat (1 point); 15 grams (2 points); 20 grams (3 points); or 25 or more (4 points)
- Cholesterol: 100 milligrams (1 point); 125 milligrams (2 points); 150 milligrams (3 points); or 175 milligrams or more (4 points)
- Less than 3 grams of fiber: 1 point
- More than 1,000 milligrams of sodium (1 point); 1,500 milligrams (2 points); 2,000 milligrams (3 points); or 2,500 milligrams or more (4 points)
- Trans fat (trans fat must be reported on nutrition panels if the product contains more than 0.5 grams per serving): 1 point

Using these scores, Cancer Project dietitians selected the most unhealthful gourmet burger from each fast-food chain. These items were then compared and ranked to establish the final list of the five most unhealthful gourmet burgers.

Detailed Results:

Ranked from worst to least bad, the least-healthy gourmet burgers are:

Bacon Deluxe Triple (Wendy's)

Rating: Worst gourmet burger

Overall score: 23

Price: \$6.67

1,140 calories, 71 grams of fat, 31 grams of saturated fat, 3.5 grams of trans fat, 290 milligrams of cholesterol, 2,470 milligrams of sodium, 2 grams of fiber, processed meat, high-fat dairy

The newest fast-food gourmet burger, released in October of 2009, is also the most unhealthy. The Bacon Deluxe Triple, which has 12 ounces of beef, cheese, and mayonnaise, contains more fat, saturated fat, trans fat, and sodium than a person should consume in an entire day. This sandwich also contains four strips of bacon, a processed meat linked to increased colorectal cancer risk.

The Guacamole Bacon Six Dollar Burger (Carl's Jr.)

Rating: Second-worst gourmet burger

Overall score: 19

Price: \$4.99

1,040 calories, 70 grams of fat, 25 grams of saturated fat, 145 milligrams of cholesterol, 2,240 milligrams of sodium, 4 grams of fiber, processed meat, high-fat dairy

This burger—half a pound of Black Angus Beef, guacamole, two strips of bacon, two slices of cheese, and Santa Fe sauce—derives more than 60 percent of its calories from fat. Scientific research has linked diets high in fat to an increased risk of cancers, diabetes, and heart disease. The Guacamole Bacon Six Dollar Burger also contains 2,240 milligrams of sodium—more than 90 percent of the recommended maximum for an entire day.

Steakhouse XT Burger (Burger King)

Rating: Third-worst gourmet burger

Overall score: 16

Price: \$5.69

970 calories, 61 grams of fat, 23 grams of saturated fat, 1 gram of trans fat, 135 milligrams of cholesterol, 1,930 milligrams of sodium, high-fat dairy

This steakhouse burger is topped with high-fat mayonnaise, cheese, and fried onions. It contains more artery-clogging saturated fat than a person should consume in an entire day, and it also has an astonishing 1,930 milligrams of sodium—more than three-fourths 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 and may increase the risk of stomach cancer.

Sirloin Cheeseburger (Jack in the Box)

Rating: Fourth-worst gourmet burger

Overall score: 15

Price: \$4.64-\$5.29

941 calories, 59 grams of fat, 18 grams of saturated fat, 2 grams of trans fat, 143 milligrams of cholesterol, 1,890 milligrams of sodium, 2 grams fiber, high-fat dairy

Jack in the Box was the first fast-food chain to offer a sirloin burger. This sirloin patty topped with American cheese and peppercorn mayonnaise also offers a whopping 941 calories and 59 grams of fat. It also includes almost half of the daily recommended maximum of cholesterol.

Angus Bacon and Cheese (McDonald's)

Rank: Fifth-worst gourmet burger

Overall score: 12

Price: \$4.23

790 calories, 39 grams of fat, 17 grams of saturated fat, 2 grams of trans fat, 145 milligrams of cholesterol, 2,070 milligrams of sodium, 4 grams of fiber, processed meat, high-fat dairy

After two years of test marketing, McDonald's released its first new burgers since the Big N' Tasty in 2001. All three Angus burgers—a line of six-ounce burgers made with Angus beef—are high in fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol. But the Angus Bacon and Cheese also features bacon, a processed meat product linked to increased risk of colorectal cancer. The sandwich, which contains Angus beef and processed American cheese, has a whopping 2,070 milligrams of sodium and 17 grams of artery-clogging saturated fat.

More Healthful Options

Consumers need not give up gourmet tastes to eat healthfully. These days, many casual-dining and fast-food restaurants offer low-fat, cholesterol-free options.

Chipotle, Baja Fresh, and other Mexican-style fast-food establishments offer burritos with rice, beans, veggies, and salsa that have zero cholesterol and very little fat. These meals also contain much more fiber, which plays a key role in preventing colon cancer and can leave one feeling fuller longer.

Panera Bread's café offers several healthful items, including the low-fat black bean soup and low-fat garden vegetable soup. A half-order of the black bean soup combined

with half of a classic café salad has less than 200 calories and provides filling fiber and a full serving of vegetables.

Many of the noodle dishes at Noodles and Company—like the Bangkok Curry—feature cancer-fighting vegetables like broccoli and cabbage and contain fewer than 500 calories.

At Burger King, a BK Veggie (without mayonnaise) offers a fraction of the calories, fat, sodium, and cholesterol found in the Steakhouse XT burger for a fraction of the price.

Preparing food at home offers a low-cost way to create a delicious and healthful meal. Frozen veggie burgers available at the grocery store offer one healthful option. For other meal ideas and recipes, go to www.CancerProject.org.