



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 Super Bowl Party Foods

A Report from the Cancer Project

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As the Arizona Cardinals and the Pittsburgh Steelers prepare to face off in Tampa's Raymond James Stadium, football fans across the country are deciding what foods to serve at their Super Bowl parties. Although chicken wings, pepperoni pizzas, and sub sandwiches from fast-food restaurants are popular choices for celebrating on game day, health is not their strong suit. These high-fat, high-cholesterol party foods can increase the risk of heart disease, diabetes, and some types of cancer. Even one high-fat meal can increase the risk of a heart attack that same day, according to some research. To determine which Super Bowl party foods pose the greatest risk to public health, dietitians with the Cancer Project analyzed party-style foods available for takeout or delivery from five fast-food restaurant chains.

Findings

Cancer Project dietitians found that most popular items offered for takeout or delivery on Super Bowl Sunday are high in fat, saturated fat, calories, sodium, and cholesterol. Many items also include processed meats or grilled meats, which are linked to increased cancer risk. The five most unhealthy takeout or delivery items are ranked from worst to least bad.

The Five Worst Super Bowl Party Foods		
Rank	Food	Fast-Food Restaurant
1	Deep Dish MeatZZa Feast	Domino's Pizza
2	The Meats Pan Crust Pizza	Papa John's
3	Creamy Chicken Alfredo Baked Tuscani Pasta	Pizza Hut
4	Tuna Melt	Quiznos
5	Honey BBQ Wings	KFC

Detailed results, including nutritional information, can be found on page 4.

Background

Super Bowl Sunday is second only to Thanksgiving in the amount of food consumed, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.¹ At Super Bowl gatherings across the country, millions of Americans order takeout or delivery food from a restaurant—58 percent order pizza, 50 percent order chicken wings, and 20 percent order sandwiches or subs.² Papa John's alone expects to sell more than 750,000 pizzas and 1 million chicken wings on game day.³ Many pizza places are now offering other foods, including pasta, which is also included in this report.

Regular consumption of high-fat foods increases the long-term risk of heart disease,⁴ diabetes,⁵ and some types of cancer.^{6,7,8} High-fat meals can even raise the risk of a heart attack on game day itself: Sports fans already face an elevated risk of heart attack while viewing stressful sporting events,⁹ and other research has found that a single fatty meal, like pizza or chicken wings, can raise blood pressure, stiffen major arteries, and cause the heart to beat harder.^{10, 11}

Review Process

In January of 2009, dietitians with the Cancer Project reviewed the menus of five fast-food chains offering takeout or delivery on Super Bowl Sunday. Dietitians obtained menu information by reviewing company Web sites.

Dietitians evaluated each 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, 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.

Grilled meats: Grilling some animal products, including chicken, beef, pork, and fish, can produce cancer-causing compounds called heterocyclic amines (HCAs). 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 high in 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 the risk of prostate cancer. When humans drink cow’s milk—even skim milk or fat-free 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. 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.

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.

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 less than half the recommended 35 grams to 40 grams of fiber per day.

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

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
- 300 calories or more (1 point) or 400 calories or more (2 points)
- 10 grams of fat or more (1 point) or 20 grams of fat or more (2 points)
- 2.5 grams or more of saturated fat (1 point) or 5 grams or more of saturated fat (2 points)
- Cholesterol: 1 point
- Less than 3 grams of fiber: 1 point
- 400 milligrams or more of sodium (1 point) or 1,000 milligrams or more of sodium (2 points)
- No fruit or vegetable serving (tomato sauce does not count as a vegetable serving): 1 point

Using these scores, Cancer Project dietitians then chose the five worst Super Bowl takeout or delivery items from the fast-food establishments. To break a tie between the Deep Dish MeatZZa Feast from Domino's Pizza and the Meats Pan Crust Pizza from Papa John's, these two items were further compared by ranking nutritional criteria—total fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, calories, and sodium—from highest to lowest. The Deep Dish MeatZZa Feast scored worse in every criterion, so dietitians named it the worst Super Bowl party food.

Detailed Results

All nutrient information is for a single serving of each item.

Deep Dish MeatZZa Feast (Domino's Pizza)

Rank: Worst Super Bowl party food

Overall score: 15

430 calories, 22 grams of fat, 8.5 grams of saturated fat, 40 milligrams of cholesterol, 1,440 milligrams of sodium, 5 grams of fiber, no fruits or vegetables

Just one-eighth of the Dish MeatZZa Feast oozing with extra cheese contains 22 grams of artery-clogging fat and 8.5 grams of cancer-causing saturated fat. It's also covered in pepperoni, ham, and sausage—all processed meats linked to increased risk of colorectal cancer. That same serving of the MeatZZA Feast also offers 1,440 milligrams of sodium—over half of the recommended daily maximum. Dietitians broke a tie between this item and the Meats Pan Crust Pizza from Papa John's by further comparing nutritional criteria. The Deep Dish MeatZZa Feast scored worse in every criterion, so dietitians named it the worst Super Bowl party food.

The Meats Pan Crust Pizza (Papa John's)**Rank: Second-worst Super Bowl party food****Overall score: 15****420 calories, 19 grams of fat, 8 grams of saturated fat, 30 milligrams of cholesterol, 1,140 milligrams of sodium, 1 gram of fiber, no fruits or vegetables**

You'll find more pig skin on this pizza than on the field on game day. Piled with pepperoni, sausage, bacon, and ham, the Meats Pan Crust Pizza has the most processed meat—which increases the risk of colorectal cancer—of the five worst Super Bowl party foods. It's also high in calories and fat and contains 1,140 milligrams of sodium—nearly half the recommended daily maximum.

Creamy Chicken Alfredo Baked Tuscani Pasta (Pizza Hut)**Rank: Third-worst Super Bowl party food****Overall score: 12****633 calories, 33 grams of fat, 11 grams of saturated fat, 70 milligrams of cholesterol, 1,250 milligrams of sodium, 4 grams of fiber, no fruits or vegetables**

One-fourth of an order of Creamy Chicken Alfredo Baked Tuscani Pasta has the most fat and saturated fat of any item in this report. This dish also includes grilled chicken, which contains PhIP, one of a group of carcinogenic compounds produced when meats are cooked at high temperatures, as in grilling or barbecuing. Alfredo sauce is usually made with butter, heavy cream and parmesan cheese. Incorporating high-fat dairy products into one's diet can contribute to weight gain and increased risk of heart disease, some cancers, and other health complications.

Tuna Melt (Quiznos)**Rank: Fourth-worst Super Bowl party food****Overall score: 8****375 calories, 27.75 grams of fat, 5.25 grams of saturated fat, 42.5 milligrams of cholesterol, 465 milligrams of sodium, 1.5 grams of fiber, fruits or vegetables**

Half of a small tuna melt might sound pretty healthy to some people, but the mayo and cheddar cheese help load this sub down with 27.75 grams of fat, 5.25 grams of saturated fat, and 42.5 milligrams of cholesterol per serving. Moreover, fish consumption is already Americans' primary source of exposure to mercury, a potent neurotoxin. Albacore tuna is one of the most polluted species, but all tuna poses risks.

Honey BBQ Wings (KFC)

Rank: Fifth-worst Super Bowl takeout or delivery food

Overall score: 6

180 calories, 10 grams of fat, 2 grams of saturated fat, 40 milligrams of cholesterol, 520 milligrams of sodium, 0 grams of fiber, no fruits or vegetables

KFC is “the official wing sponsor of the NFL” and the company’s Super Bowl commercial could not be more correct in bragging that the new Honey BBQ Wings “hit you in three ways.” Just two of these wings hit a consumer with 40 milligrams of heart-stopping cholesterol, 520 milligrams of high blood pressure-inducing sodium, and 0 grams of cancer-fighting fiber. Most football fans are likely to eat more than two wings during a four-hour-long football game.

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