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Advancing cancer prevention and survival through nutrition education and research.

## The Five Most Unhealthy Foods at Mexican Restaurants

A Report from The Cancer Project  
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As Americans prepare to celebrate Cinco de Mayo, they may want to reconsider what they'll order from their favorite Mexican fast-food restaurants. Today's fast-food versions of Hispanic foods often contain astonishingly high levels of calories, fat, and sodium, as well as carcinogenic processed meats and high-fat dairy products. The consequence of consuming unhealthy meals such as these is that one-third of adults in America are obese, increasing their risk for chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, and cancer.

To determine which menu items pose the greatest risk to consumers' health, The Cancer Project analyzed entrées from five leading Mexican fast-food and casual-dining restaurant chains.

### Findings

The Cancer Project's dietitians found that some entrées at Mexican restaurants contain more fat, saturated fat, and sodium than a person should consume in an entire day. All are high in calories, and many contain processed meat products, which can increase cancer risk. The five most unhealthy items were ranked from worst to least bad. Here are the five worst entrées:

Rank	Worst Mexican Items	Restaurant
Worst	Charbroiled Steak Nachos	Baja Fresh Mexican Grill
2nd worst	Grilled Fajita Salad	Chevys Fresh Mex
3rd worst	Crispy Honey-Chipotle Chicken Crispers	Chili's
4th worst	Pulled Pork Burrito	Qdoba Mexican Grill
5th worst	Ground Beef Burrito	Moe's Southwest Grill

## Background

Cinco de Mayo is a holiday observing Mexico's victory over the French in the Battle of Puebla in 1862. This is not Mexico's Independence Day, nor is it celebrated in Mexico like it is in the United States. For many Americans, Cinco de Mayo is a day of revelry that includes indulging at Mexican fast-food restaurants. But it is also an opportunity to celebrate Mexico's healthful cuisine.

Replacing unhealthy Mexican-style fast food with traditional Mexican staples—beans, corn, rice, and seasonal vegetables—could help reverse America's obesity epidemic.

Diet-related health problems are serious issues for all Americans, but the National Institutes of Health has found that Mexican-Americans are almost twice as likely as non-Hispanic whites to be diagnosed with diabetes. Obesity rates among Hispanics are particularly high in Arizona, California, and Texas, resulting in elevated diabetes and cancer rates.

## Review Process

In March 2010, dietitians with The Cancer Project researched Mexican food offered by national fast-food and casual-dining restaurants.

Dietitians obtained menu information by reviewing company Web sites, visiting restaurants, and contacting restaurants located out of state by phone. A comprehensive review of nutritional information was obtained.

Dietitians evaluated each item based on specific nutritional data, including the item's calories, total fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, and sodium. Ratings also reflect whether the product contains processed meats, which are linked to increased risk of colorectal cancer.

## Key Factors

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

**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. 50 grams of processed meat is equivalent to one hot dog.

**High Caloric Intake:** Obesity leads to increased risk of several chronic diseases. Heart disease, diabetes, and cancer are all greatly influenced by excess weight gain. Men and women have higher levels of hormones (i.e., testosterone and estrogen) when their weight increases, making them more prone to disease. Maintaining a healthy weight can significantly reduce our risk of certain cancers and other life threatening diseases.

**High Fat Content:** Diets high in 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. Naturally occurring trans fats are only contained in animal products. Fat contains 9 calories per gram and is typically more abundant in animal products, especially saturated fat, which significantly increases bad cholesterol.

**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 less than 2,300 milligrams per day—the equivalent of about one teaspoon of salt—and some health experts suggest consuming less than 1,500 milligrams per day.

**Cholesterol:** Cholesterol is a waxy substance found in the bloodstream and in the body’s cells. Every animal cell contains cholesterol as it is a necessary component of the cell’s membrane. The body naturally makes more than enough cholesterol to serve this biological function. 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. Consuming large amounts of cholesterol in one’s diet may eventually lead to reduced heart function. Fiber helps to remove blood cholesterol and is only found in plant foods.

## **Rating System**

This rating system was developed based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans established by the United State Department of Agriculture (USDA). Typically, a 2,000 calorie diet is the standard recommended energy intake for Americans. With these health-based criteria in mind and the recommendations from the USDA, The Cancer Project ranked the Mexican restaurant items surveyed in this report.

Items with the most points were ranked the least healthful. A truly healthful meal would have no points. Points are awarded based on a system derived from

standards set by the USDA and based on the research from the Institute of Medicine, the organization that sets the dietary reference intakes for all nutrients. This point system is based on one-third (one of three daily meals) of the Dietary Reference Intake (DRI) from the USDA Food Guide. The numbers equate to 667 calories, 22 grams of fat, 6 grams of saturated fat, 77 milligrams of cholesterol, and 600 milligrams of sodium.

Points were given if the menu item had the following:

- **Processed Meat:** 2
- **Total Calories (points):** 701-900 (1); 901-1,100 (2); 1,101-1,300 (3); 1,301-1,500 (4); 1,501-1,700 (5); 1,701-1,900 (6); 1,901-2,100 (7); 2,101-2,301 (8); >2,301 (9)
- **Total Fat Grams (points):** 23-32 (1); 33-42 (2); 43-52 (3); 53-62 (4); 63-72 (5); 73-82 (6); 83-92 (7); 93-102 (8); 103-112 (9); >113 (10)
- **Saturated Fat Grams (points):** 7-10 (1); 11-14 (2); 15-18 (3); 19-22 (4); 23-26 (5); 27-30 (6); 31-34 (7); 35-38 (8) 39-42 (9); >43 (10)
- **Cholesterol Milligrams (points):** 78-100 (1); 101-125 (2); 126-150 (3); 151-175 (4); 176-200 (5); 201-225 (6); 226-250 (7); >251 (8)
- **Sodium Milligrams (points):** 601-1,200 (1); 1,201-1,800 (2); 1,801-2,400 (3); 2,401-3,000 (4); 3,001-3,600 (5); 3,601-4,200 (6); 4,201-4,800 (7); 4,801-5,400 (8); >5,401 (9)

Using these scores, Cancer Project dietitians selected the most unhealthful Mexican entrées from each restaurant chain. These items were then compared and ranked to establish the final list of the five most unhealthful Mexican entrées.

## **Results:**

### **Charbroiled Steak Nachos at Baja Fresh Mexican Grill**

**Rating: Worst Meal at a Mexican Restaurant**

**Score: 40 points**

**2,120 calories, 118 grams of fat, 44 grams of saturated fat, 255 milligrams of cholesterol, 2,990 milligrams of sodium**

Chips and salsa? More like chips, cholesterol, and carcinogens. These tortilla chips are smothered in melted Jack and cheddar cheese, slathered with sour cream, and topped with charbroiled steak. High-fat dairy products increase hormones, insulin-like growth factor-1, known to increase prostate and breast cancer risk. Grilling meats produces carcinogens known as heterocyclic amines that increase colon cancer risk.

**Grilled Fajita Salad at Chevys Fresh Mex****Rating: Second-Worst Meal at a Mexican Restaurant****Score: 28 points****1,516 calories, 118 grams of fat, 31 grams of saturated fat, 175 milligrams of cholesterol, 1,696 milligrams of sodium**

Although eating fresh and colorful salads can help prevent cancer, salads at restaurants like Chevys can be very high in fat. More than 70 percent of the total calories from this salad are from fat in ingredients such as Cotija and Jack cheeses. Excess fat increases weight and hormone production that can greatly influence cancer risk.

**Crispy Honey-Chipotle Chicken Crispers at Chili's****Rating: Third-Worst Meal at a Mexican Restaurant****Score: 20 points****1,650 calories, 74 grams of fat, 16 grams of saturated fat, cholesterol levels are unavailable, 4,060 milligrams of sodium**

Chili's menu lists this item as an appetizer. But it leaves no room for a main course. This appetizer, served with home-style fries and ranch dressing, almost exceeds one's daily caloric requirements. Chili's does not provide cholesterol levels for their menu items. But chicken and ranch dressing both contain cholesterol that can lead to reduced heart function.

**Pulled Pork Burrito at Qdoba Mexican Grill****Rating: Fourth-Worst Meal at a Mexican Restaurant****Score: 18 points****1,255 calories, 52 grams of fat, 22 grams of saturated fat, 150 milligrams of cholesterol, 3,210 milligrams of sodium**

This cheese tortilla is packed with pulled pork, sour cream, cheese—and 3,210 milligrams of sodium. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has recommended that people at risk of high blood pressure consume no more than 1,500 milligrams of sodium daily.

**Ground Beef Burrito at Moe's Southwest Grill****Rating: Fifth-Worst Meal at a Mexican Restaurant****Score: 17 points****1,135 calories, 62 grams of fat, 21 grams saturated fat, 120 milligrams of cholesterol, 2,590 milligrams of sodium**

Moe's is known for its "Homewrecker" burritos. But its ground beef burrito is the "healthwrecker." This burrito is packed with ground beef, cheese, sour cream,

and chipotle ranch dressing. This high-fat meal is not what the doctor ordered. Ground beef intake can also increase the risk of cancer: Recent studies show that red meat consumption can increase colon cancer risk by as much as 300 percent. And with more than half of the daily recommended calories, this menu item increases the risk of weight gain. Obese populations have the greatest cancer risk.

### **More Healthful Options**

Although many unhealthy fat- and cholesterol-laden foods are offered at these restaurants, consumers can find more healthful meals. Cancer Project dietitians applied the same rating system to find the healthiest options when dining out.

Sodium levels in the following options are still high, but they are much lower in calories and fat, and all items were very low in total points under the Cancer Project's rating system. The average amount of calories saved by choosing the healthier option is about 1,000 calories per meal. Keep in mind, 3,500 calories equal one pound of added body weight. Eating just four meals from the healthy options, instead of the worst items, could potentially lead to one pound of weight loss.

Make sure to request that the following items are prepared without dairy products.

#### **Bean and Rice Burrito from Chevys Fresh Mex**

**Score: 2 points**

**515 calories, 11 grams of fat, 4 grams of saturated fat, 0 grams of cholesterol, 1,650 milligrams of sodium**

Choose from the a la carte menu to make a bean burrito with a large tortilla, black beans, rice, and pico de gallo salsa. This tasty burrito is full of fiber, and, even with the guacamole, low in fat. It does not exceed the recommended amount of calories for one meal and is a great alternative to Chevys' Grilled Fajita Salad.

#### **Grilled Veggie Bowl from Qdoba Mexican Grill**

**Score: 3 points**

**520 calories, 13 grams of fat, 2 grams of saturated fat, 0 grams of cholesterol, 1,920 milligrams of sodium**

The Signature Flavor Grilled Veggie Bowl—filled with cilantro-lime rice, black beans, lettuce, pico de gallo salsa, salsa roja, verde salsa, and grilled vegetables—is low in fat and has no cholesterol. Although this dish is high in sodium, the potassium from the beans and vegetables helps eliminate sodium from the body. Consuming fruit and water also helps remove excess sodium.

**Black Bean Tacos with House Salad from Chili's**

**Score: 4 points**

**790 calories, 28 grams of fat, 3 grams of saturated fat, 0 grams of cholesterol, 1,925 milligrams of sodium**

This is a great choice for your overall health when dining out. Low in fat and calories, high in fiber (18 grams), and containing no cholesterol, the flour tortillas, black beans, rice, and house salad provide nutrients to boost weight loss and lower risk of major diseases.

**Fat Sam Fajita from Moe's Southwest Grill**

**Score: 4 points**

**620 calories, 23 grams of fat, 3 grams of saturated fat, 0 grams of cholesterol, 1,875 milligrams of sodium**

One simple way to eat more healthfully is to add more color to your plate. This colorful dish includes tofu, lettuce, mixed veggies, and pico de gallo salsa wrapped in a flour tortilla.

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