



## The Five Most Unhealthy Fast-Food Kids Meals

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As Burger King and other fast-food companies unveil new menu items marketed to children, there is growing controversy over the link between high-fat fast food and childhood obesity. One in three young people is now overweight, and children who live near fast-food restaurants are more likely to be obese, according to a recent study in the *International Journal of Pediatric Obesity*.<sup>1</sup>

To determine whether heavily marketed kids meals are putting children’s health at risk, dietitians with the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM) analyzed menu items from five major fast-food chains.

### Findings

PCRM dietitians found that most kids meals marketed by national fast-food chains are alarmingly high in fat, cholesterol, and calories. Some contain more sodium and about as much saturated fat as a child should consume in an entire day. None of the five meals highlighted in PCRM’s report meet the nutritional standards for children’s meals set forward in recommendations published this year by the Institute of Medicine.<sup>2</sup>

Here are the five most unhealthy kids meals at fast-food restaurants, ranked from worst to least bad.

Rank	Five Worst Fast-Food Kids Meals	Nutritional Profile
Worst	<b>McDonald’s Mighty Kids Meal:</b> Double Cheeseburger, French fries, and chocolate milk	840 calories; 37 grams of fat
2nd Worst	<b>Wendy’s Kids’ Meal:</b> Chicken Sandwich, French fries, and chocolate Frosty	770 calories; 34 grams of fat
3rd Worst	<b>KFC Kids Meal:</b> Popcorn chicken, potato wedges, string cheese, and soda	800 calories; 1,800 milligrams of sodium
4th Worst	<b>A&amp;W Kids Meal:</b> Cheeseburger, French fries, and soda	780 calories; 9 grams of saturated fat
5th Worst	<b>Burger King’s BK Kids:</b> Breakfast muffin sandwich meal	95 milligrams of cholesterol; exceeds recommended limit on sodium intake for child’s breakfast

## **Background**

It has been 30 years since McDonald's began marketing the Happy Meal to children. Since then, nearly every major fast-food restaurant has introduced a kids meal. The latest trend among these companies is promoting kids meals as healthy. A recent report found that in the last year, menu items in American fast-food chains labeled as healthy grew by 65 percent.

McDonald's Mighty Kids Meals are one example. The company says the meals are the "perfect size for those in-between." But the meal analyzed for this report has nearly double the recommended amount of fat for one meal and more than double the amount of saturated fat and sodium for one meal. Burger King says that its BK Breakfast Kids Meal "joins [the] brand's roster of meals that meet stringent nutrition criteria." But the muffin sandwich provides more than the recommended cholesterol intake for one meal.

High-fat, high-cholesterol foods like these have contributed to America's childhood obesity epidemic, which increases the risk of diabetes and other chronic diseases. Among children and adolescents ages 2 to 19 in the United States, 31.7 percent are overweight and 16.9 percent are obese.<sup>3</sup> One in three children born in the year 2000 will develop diabetes at some point in his or her life.<sup>4</sup>

## **Review Process**

In August 2010, dietitians from PCRM looked at national fast-food chains' kids menus and compared nutrient content. Dietitians obtained nutrient information by reviewing the company websites and by contacting the companies directly to clarify online information.

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

## **Key Factors**

PCRM dietitians looked at several key factors to determine the healthfulness of each item:

**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. In January 2010, the Centers for Disease Control and prevention found that 20 percent of adolescents ages 12 to 19 have at least one abnormal lipid level (LDL cholesterol, HDL cholesterol, or triglycerides). Among overweight and obese adolescents, those rates were higher, with 22 percent of overweight and 43 percent of obese children having one or more abnormality.<sup>5</sup> 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.

**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. Among children and adolescents ages 2 to 19 in the United States, 31.7 percent are overweight and 16.9 percent are obese. Childhood obesity has become an epidemic in the past three decades. Among children 2 to 5 years old, obesity prevalence increased from 5 to 12.4 percent; among children 6 to 11, it increased from 6.5 to 17 percent; and among adolescents 12 to 19 years old, it increased from 5 to 17.6 percent.<sup>6</sup> Maintaining a healthy weight can significantly reduce the risk of certain cancers and other life-threatening diseases.

**Sodium:** Diets high in sodium can increase the risk of high blood pressure, a condition that can lead to cardiovascular disease and kidney problems. The Institute of Medicine recommends that children's intake of sodium should be less than 637 to 737 milligrams (depending on age) at lunch and less than 435 to 474 milligrams (depending on age) at breakfast. Some health experts suggest consuming less than 1,500 milligrams of sodium 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.

**Red and Processed Meats:** Consuming red and processed meats—including deli meats, hot dogs, hamburgers, 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 and the World Cancer Research Fund. There is evidence that red and processed meats are linked to other cancers as well.

## **Detailed Results**

### **McDonald's Mighty Kids Meal**

**Rating: Worst Kids Meal at a Fast-Food Restaurant**

**Meal items: Double cheeseburger, French fries, and chocolate milk  
840 calories, 37 grams of fat, 14 grams of saturated fat, 85 milligrams of cholesterol, 1,460 milligrams of sodium**

With 840 calories, 37 grams of fat, and about as much sodium as a child should consume in an entire day, the McDonald's Mighty Kids Meal tops PCRM's list of the five most unhealthful fast-food meals marketed to children. This meal contains the most calories, fat, and saturated fat of any meal analyzed.

### **Wendy's Kids' Meal**

**Rating: Second-Worst Kids Meal at a Fast-Food Restaurant**

**Meal items: Chicken sandwich, French fries, and chocolate Frosty  
770 calories, 34 grams of fat, 9.5 grams of saturated fat, 60 milligrams of cholesterol, 1,390 milligrams of sodium**

Wendy's calls this meal "kid sized." But its calories and fat are supersized—more than one meal should contain. That's not surprising, given that it features a high-fat chicken sandwich, French fries cooked in oil, and a Frosty containing milk and cream. America's rising obesity rates reflect increased intake of oils, meat, cheese, and frozen desserts, according to a recent study published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*.<sup>7</sup> Wendy's Kids' Meal contains all of these factors.

### **KFC Kids Meal**

**Rating: Third-Worst Kids Meal at a Fast-Food Restaurant**

**Meal Items: Popcorn chicken, potato wedges, string cheese, and soda  
800 calories, 34.5 grams of fat, 7.5 grams of saturated fat, 65 milligrams of cholesterol, 1,800 mg of sodium**

This meal features cholesterol-laden popcorn chicken, high-fat potato wedges, and more sodium than children 4 to 8 should consume in an entire day, according to the Institute of Medicine. The high levels of sodium commonly found in kids meals can contribute to high blood pressure and calcium loss from bones.

### **A&W Kids Meal**

**Rating: Fourth-Worst Kids Meal at a Fast-Food Restaurant**

**Meal Items: Cheeseburger, French fries, and soda  
780 calories, 29 grams of fat, 9 grams of saturated fat, 70 milligrams of cholesterol, 1,360 milligrams of sodium**

The A&W Kids Meal contains more calories, saturated fat, and sodium than the Institute of Medicine recommends for a child's lunch. High-fat, high-cholesterol foods like those found in the A&W Kids Meal are causing overweight children's arteries to resemble those of 45-year-old adults, according to a recent study.<sup>8</sup> And a study published this month in the journal *Pediatrics* found that overweight girls show signs of puberty at a younger age, which can increase the risk of breast cancer.<sup>9</sup>

### **BK Breakfast Kids Meal**

**Rating: Fifth-Worst Kids Meal at a Fast-Food Restaurant**

**Meal Items: Muffin sandwich, BK Fresh Apple Fries, low-fat caramel sauce, apple juice  
410 calories, 11.5 grams of fat, 4 grams of saturated fat, 95 milligrams of cholesterol, 600 milligrams of sodium**

This meal has more sodium than children should consume at breakfast, according to the Institute of Medicine, and it also has the most cholesterol of any item analyzed for this report. The cheese and egg push the cholesterol level well above the recommendations for one meal. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that one in five teens has an abnormal cholesterol level,<sup>5</sup> a risk factor for heart disease, the No. 1 cause of death in the United States.<sup>10</sup>

## References

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