

Just Junk?

by Jennifer Magid

See what's really in your favorite fun foods.

You know you shouldn't eat junk food, but a bit every now and then is OK ... right? Yes and no. "The problem with junk food in our current food culture is that it seems to slip into every meal: We have a Pop-Tart for breakfast, a Snapple at lunch, a soda after school, fast food for dinner, followed by an ice-cream sandwich," says Jill Jayne, a registered dietitian in New York City who creates nutrition education programs for teens. "You can eat junk food. It just shouldn't be its own food group."

Junk Puts Your Body in a Funk

Determining which foods are junk and which aren't can be confusing. Is fast food junk? What about high-calorie or convenience-store foods? Think of it this way: If the food has very few vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients that you need to be healthy, it's probably junk. Food that qualifies as junk will have a lot of sugar, fat, or salt.

Junk food can lead to obesity, heart disease, and diabetes. But you may not realize how much it can immediately make you feel like, well, junk. The fat in those foods can build up on your blood vessel walls, Jayne explains, which "makes it harder for your blood vessels to circulate blood around your body." That can affect how well you are able to perform during sports and other exercise-right away.

Jordyn L., a 16-year-old from Phoenix, has experienced the lousy post-junk food feeling firsthand. "When I would eat fast food or processed things, I would definitely feel the difference in my body the next day," she says. After doing an internship at a health food company, Jordyn became a teen health ambassador at her school. She now encourages other students to cut out the junk so they can feel better too. "They can't believe that ... the one who used to be obsessed with cake batter ice cream [is] now talking about organic this and healthy that!" Jordyn says about herself.

Here's a closer look at some popular junk foods, with some tasty and healthy options.

Calories Count

These days, a visit to a restaurant, a movie theater, or a fast-food eatery can be a rude awakening. Depending on where you live in the country, you may see how many calories are in the foods for sale. In New York City, where many chain restaurants and eateries are required to display a food's caloric information, 86 percent of restaurant diners were surprised by the calorie counts and 82 percent said the numbers affected what they ordered, according to a survey by food industry consulting firm Technomic Inc.

French Fries (medium)



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One box of fries fills about 50 percent of your daily allowance of fat. The cooking process also produces the chemical acrylamide, which in high doses has been linked to cancer and nerve damage.



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Healthier choice: A fast-food restaurant's salad, which has less fat and more vitamins and other nutrients



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Healthiest choice: A baked potato. One potato has about 1 percent of your daily allowance of fat. Try it with grated Parmesan cheese and basil.

Cola (8 fluid ounces)



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One of soft drinks' main ingredients is high-fructose corn syrup, which has no nutritional value and, in some studies, has been linked to obesity.



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Healthier choice: unsweetened iced tea



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Healthiest (and caffeine-free) choice: Mix seltzer water ($\frac{3}{4}$ of a glass) with 100 percent juice ($\frac{1}{4}$ of the glass), and add a lemon wedge.

Candy Bar (2 ounces)



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Many candy bars include corn syrup, along with roughly 14 grams of fat, about 21 percent of your daily allowance of fat.



John Klein/Current Health

Healthier choice: A chocolate mint, which has only a fraction of a candy bar's fat, or 1 ounce of dark chocolate, which contains protective chemicals called flavonoids



John Klein/Current Health

Healthiest choice: Peanut butter on graham crackers, with milk. A tablespoon of peanut butter has about 8 grams of fat, but this combo is lower in sugar than the options at left.

Nachos (large size at movie theater)



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The number of calories (about 1,101) and amount of fat (54 grams) is more than half the amount your body needs for an entire day!



John Klein/Current Health

Healthier choice: Make your own nachos at home with baked tortilla chips (they have about 110 calories per serving) and melted low-fat cheese.



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Healthiest choice: Whole-wheat crackers (pick a high-fiber brand) with low-fat cheese

Cheese Curls (1 ounce)



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his snack has a lot of fat (about one-third of your daily allowance in one serving) and sodium (590 milligrams, or 25 percent of what your body needs daily).



John Klein/Current Health

Healthier choice: One serving of unsalted plain pretzels has about 75 milligrams of sodium, or 3 percent of the recommended daily value.



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Healthiest choice: 3 cups unbuttered, unsalted, air-popped popcorn, which has 3 milligrams of sodium and 3.6 grams of good-for-you fiber

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Food that qualifies as junk may contain a lot of the following EXCEPT
 - A. milk
 - B. salt
 - C. fat
 - D. sugar

2. How do fries, a fast-food restaurant salad, and a baked potato compare to each other?
 - A. The salad and potato have the same amount of fat.
 - B. The potato has much less fat than the fries have.
 - C. The fries have less fat than the potato has.
 - D. The salad has more fat than the fries have.

3. After reading the passage, what can you most likely conclude about junk food?
 - A. Most junk foods are actually healthier than people think.
 - B. Some people feel better after eating lots of junk food.
 - C. Junk food can often be replaced with healthier options.
 - D. Eating junk food doesn't often lead to health problems.

4. Read this sentence from the passage:

"After doing an internship at a health food company, Jordyn became a teen health ambassador at her school."

In this sentence, the word **ambassador** means
 - A. a representative
 - B. a literary author
 - C. a replacement
 - D. a medical expert

5. Why does the author include the first paragraph ("You know you shouldn't eat junk food...") in the passage?

- A. to describe what kinds of junk food teens crave
- B. to persuade teenagers to give up junk food
- C. to explain the health risks of eating junk food
- D. to include an expert opinion about junk food

6. According to the passage, what health problems can eating too much junk food lead to?

7. Jordyn L. cut out junk food from her diet and now encourages other students to do the same. In what ways might her work benefit others? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

Making homemade nachos with baked tortilla chips and low-fat cheese can be a healthier alternative _____ eating nachos made at a restaurant.

- A. as
- B. to
- C. like
- D. or

9. **Vocabulary Word:** nutrients: foods or other substances that provide nourishment to the body.

Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: