

20 Foods Your Cardiologist Won't Eat

These restaurant meals are so salty you could throw them over your shoulder for good luck. If you care about heart health, blood pressure, and stroke, don't let them past your lips

By Lauren Murrow

Salty food may seem like the least of your worries, especially if you're among the 40 percent of people who mindlessly shake salt on every dish. An extra dash here, a few sprinkles there—what's the big deal?

A lot, when you consider the fact that a mere teaspoon of the stuff contains all 2,300 milligrams (mg) of your recommended daily allotment. Yet daily salt consumption is on the rise in the United States—from 2,300 mg in the 1970s to more than 3,300 mg today. And according to Monell Chemical Senses Center researchers, 77 percent of that sodium intake comes from processed-food purveyors and restaurants. Their motivation: Pile on the salt so we don't miss natural flavors and fresh ingredients.

Why is that a problem? With ever-expanding portion sizes, supersalty foods are displacing fresh fruits and vegetables, which are rich in potassium. **And a 1:2 ratio of dietary salt to potassium is critical for your health.** Studies show that a high-sodium, low-potassium diet is linked to a host of maladies, including high blood pressure, stroke, osteoporosis, and exercise-induced asthma.

To protect your heart, your bones, your muscles, and your taste buds, we scoured takeout menus and supermarket shelves to expose the 20 saltiest foods in America. No need to take the information with a grain of salt. These dishes provide plenty.

Find more surprising revelations about foods that threaten your health, plus thousands of smart swaps in the book *Eat This, Not That!*

(Here a sample of the top 20 starting with the “worst”)

1. The Saltiest Dish in America / Romano's Macaroni Grill Chicken Portobello

Sodium 7,300 mg

Calories 1,020

Fat 66 g

Salt Equivalent: 48 strips of bacon

With three items on our top 20 list, plus a slew of dishonorable mentions, Macaroni Grill earns its title as America's saltiest chain restaurant. But what makes this the saltiest dish in America? One word: demi-glace, a fancy French name for the viscous salt slick that blankets this disastrous dish. You would have to eat 32 cups of potassium-rich broccoli to compensate for this sodium avalanche.

2. Saltiest Appetizer / Papa John's Cheesesticks with Buffalo Sauce

Sodium 6,700 mg

Calories 2,605

Fat 113 g

Carbohydrates 296 g

Salt Equivalent: 20 orders of McDonald's large French fries

If you were to split this appetizer with two friends, you'd still be close to downing your daily sodium allowance before you even reach for the pizza. Each stick packs the same amount of sodium as a small slice of cheese pizza, and that's without dipping. Your best bet? Cheese pizza. Thin crust.

4. Saltiest Mexican Entrée / Chili's Buffalo Chicken Fajitas

Sodium 5,690 mg

Calories 1,730

Fat 107 g

Carbohydrates 143 g

Salt Equivalent: 3 1/2 pounds of salted peanuts

Here are a few offenders to choke on: fried chicken, Buffalo sauce, blue cheese, smoked bacon, ranch dressing, and sour cream. All make this the sodium equivalent of single-handedly downing three and a half baskets of Chili's bottomless tostada chips. Add rice and beans, and you've just ordered 3 days' worth of sodium and an entire day of calories. If you're salt-sensitive, avoid fajitas—any kind of fajitas—at all costs.

8. Saltiest Sandwich / Quiznos Turkey Bacon Guacamole Large Sub with Cheese and Reduced-Fat Ranch Dressing

Sodium 4,670 mg

Calories 1,120

Fat 49 g

Carbohydrates 116 g

Salt Equivalent: 7 large orders of onion rings from Burger King

First, skip the large sandwich. At Quiznos, few come in under 1,000 calories and 3,000 mg sodium. Next, abandon mozzarella for Swiss, which has a tenth of the

sodium. Finally, choose one of the low-calorie subs at Quiznos—the Tuscan Turkey, or better yet, the Honey Bourbon Chicken.

14. Saltiest Pasta / Fazoli's Rigatoni Romano

Sodium 3,180 mg

Calories 1,090

Fat 54 g

Carbohydrates 101 g

Salt Equivalent: 63 cups of popcorn

Salt is one of the top ingredients in Italian sausage, meat sauce, and mozzarella cheese, the three items that serve as this dish's backbone. Simply order your noodles topped with marinara sauce and peppery chicken. The chicken has just 1 g fat and less sodium than the other toppings you can order for your pasta.

20. Saltiest Side Dish / Denny's Honey Smoked Ham, grilled slice

Sodium 1,700 mg

Calories 85

Salt Equivalent: 12 strips of bacon

Calorie for calorie, this is the saltiest dish in America.

This side is steeped in salty brine before it's smoked, soaking up 70 percent of your daily sodium intake.