

the clear winners

A cookout without hot dogs would be like a wedding without a cake: unsatisfying, to say the least. To find the tastiest franks around, *Real Simple* staffers grilled up a stomach-busting 73 varieties, all free of trans fats and MSG. Here are the biggest crowd-pleasers.



best beef

Nathan's Skinless Beef Franks

This classic dog hit the spot with testers, who pronounced it extra-juicy and delicious. The best part? "The subtle hit of heat from the paprika."

TO BUY: \$4.50 for 16 ounces (8 dogs).



best pork and beef

Boar's Head Pork & Beef Frankfurters

The slightly sweet bologna-like flavor of this "perfectly plump" winner will delight kids. "Love the smooth texture and pink color," declared a fan of the hefty links.

TO BUY: \$5 for 16 ounces (8 dogs).



best uncured

Applegate Farms Organic Uncured Beef Hot Dogs

This uncured (meaning largely nitrate-free) pick is made from grass-fed beef. Its firm skin offers a satisfying snap with every bite. One staffer cheered, "This would hit the spot at a ball game."

TO BUY: \$7 for 12 ounces (8 dogs).



best turkey

Oscar Mayer Turkey Franks

"I can't believe this is turkey," said a tester of this health-conscious option. "With ketchup and mustard it tastes just like beef or pork." "Love the ultra-smokiness," said another.

TO BUY: \$2.70 for 16 ounces (10 dogs).



best chicken

Applegate Farms Uncured Chicken Hot Dogs

This low-fat hot dog has a "nice, clean flavor," noted a panelist. "It would be great with sauerkraut." Bonus: The dogs develop excellent grill marks.

TO BUY: \$5 for 12 ounces (8 dogs).



best vegetarian

MorningStar Farms Original Veggie Dogs

The mixture of corn, soy, eggs, and "a yummy hint of garlic" made this a hit among the panel's herbivores. "I'd eat it with chopped onions and relish."

TO BUY: \$4.30 for 11.2 ounces (8 dogs), sold in the freezer section.

nitrites 101

So what are they?

Nitrites and nitrates are compounds added to hot dogs and cured meats to extend their shelf life and improve color. They occur naturally in some vegetables, like spinach and root vegetables.

Are they bad for you?

Potentially yes, say experts. Once digested, nitrites and nitrates can form nitrosamines, which have been linked to cancer in test animals. To reduce this risk, the U.S. Department of Agriculture requires hot-dog makers to add antioxidants, like vitamin C, to their products.

How can I make a hot-dog meal healthier?

Anyone with a hot-dog habit (say, one or more a week) should try pairing the hot dogs with an antioxidant-rich food, like tomatoes, or vitamin C-packed orange juice. Or opt for uncured dogs instead.