



Calorie counts on menus just one step

I was looking forward to seeing calorie information on restaurant menus, but I just heard a study saying it doesn't seem to help people (at least children) make better choices. Is that true?

There was a small study published recently that got a lot of attention in some circles, and it did indicate that simply posting calorie information on menus may not be the panacea for the nation's obesity problem that some people hoped it would be. But don't throw in the towel yet.

The study, published in the *International Journal of Obesity*, looked at the fast-food choices of 349 children, teenagers and their parents both before and after calorie information was mandated on menus and menu boards in New York City in 2008. The study was conducted in low-income areas.

Researchers found essentially no differences in the number of calories in the items purchased after the labeling went into effect. Teenagers made up more than half of the sample, and 57 percent of them said they noticed the calorie information when ordering, but only 9 percent said it made a difference in what they ordered.

Interest in the findings is high because the Food and Drug Administration is soon expected to announce its proposed regulations

for restaurants nationwide for posting such information. But nutrition experts say the findings really need to be looked at in context. It was a relatively small study done with a narrow population. Other studies — including one on Ohio State University students — found that posting calorie information does have a positive effect.

What might be even better, though, is to make healthier choices the default when ordering food. What if a carton of milk and apple slices were the default choices in fast-food meals instead of the typical soft drink and fries? Making consumers ask for the less healthy option could go a long way toward helping people eat healthier, in much the same way as iodizing salt and slashing the number of processed foods containing trans fat have improved nutrition.

An April 2010 commentary in the *American Journal of Public Health* suggested that creating a healthier food environment so that people "can easily take heart-healthy actions in the normal course of their lives" could go a long way to improving our food choices — and our health. Will it happen? That's unclear, but helping consumers know how many calories they are consuming when they eat out could be a step toward that goal.

Chow Line is a service of Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Chow Line, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH, 43210-1044, or filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu.



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