



## Calorie counts on menus helpful

**I've heard that the new health care law will require restaurants to provide calorie information to consumers. Will that really improve people's health?**

It's not easy to predict exactly what the outcome will be from these new regulations — the proof will be in the pudding, as they say. But many nutrition experts believe the law will have a profound effect, one way or another.

First, some background: The national health care legislation passed in March includes a provision that requires restaurant chains with 20 or more locations to post calorie information about their standard offerings on menus or menu boards. The rule will apply to foods offered in buffets and salad bars, and also to foods in vending machines when an item's Nutrition Facts label isn't visible to consumers.

Many restaurants already offer this type of information, although normally it isn't as prominent as this legislation requires. And that's key, nutritionists say. Early in the health care legislation debate, the American Dietetic Association supported the inclusion of this provision, saying in a position statement that "People need scientifically valid and understandable nutrition information to make healthful choices in all venues, including restaurants."

The question is, of course, will

consumers pay attention? Several studies, including one at Ohio State University, indicate that they do indeed. That study collected data about choices consumers made among 12 entrees offered at a university dining center that operates much like a fast-food restaurant. Researchers found that when nutrition information was provided at the point of purchase, sales of high-calorie entrees dramatically decreased, while sales of lower-calorie items substantially increased.

But food experts also think the law will have a ripple effect, encouraging restaurants to offer more options that are lower in calories. That could mean offering more reasonable portion sizes — an easy way to trim calories — or offering brand new menu items that have fewer calories than are currently offered. There's already evidence that restaurants may go this route: After New York City implemented a similar law in 2008, one popular coffee chain switched its standard milk option from whole to 2 percent. Even the Ohio State study showed this kind of impact: After the study was completed, the food-service operation reformulated its highest-calorie offering to reduce the calorie content by 172 calories, from 839 to 667 calories. That kind of change can add up: Eating an extra 172 calories a day can add 11 pounds in body weight over a year.

*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](mailto:filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu).*



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