



Calories on menus having an effect

I've heard more localities are requiring restaurants to post calorie information. Is it having an effect?

The trend toward posting calorie information is growing. It started in 2008 when the New York City Board of Health began requiring restaurant chains with more than 15 stores nationally to clearly post calories on menus and menu boards. Since then, nearly two dozen jurisdictions have adopted or are considering adopting similar regulations, and two federal bills (the Menu Education and Labeling Act and the less-stringent Labeling Education and Nutrition Act) are making their way through Congress.

The idea behind such efforts is simple: People tend to pay attention to calorie information when it's readily available, such as on Nutrition Facts labels. In fact, in surveys conducted after those labels began appearing on foods in the early 1990s, three-quarters of consumers said they looked at the calorie and nutrition information, and about half said it affected their food choices.

But today, an incredible amount of food we eat is purchased at restaurants. And fast-food has become a staple: A 2004 article in the *Journal of American College of Nutrition* revealed that one in four Americans eats fast food on any given day.

The chains that must comply with these regulations have highly standardized recipes and portion sizes, so it's feasible for them to calculate calorie counts. In fact, most already have

that information available online or in brochures, but, in most places, it's usually not right in front of consumers when they order. That's a problem: A study in the *American Journal of Public Health* conducted before the New York City regulation was put in place revealed that only 0.1 percent of consumers of fast-food restaurants took the time to approach a poster or computer screen or to read a nutrition pamphlet to find nutrition information before ordering. The authors concluded that if such information is to affect consumer decision-making, it must be displayed prominently, such as on menu boards, right along with the item's price.

And the New York City regulation just may be having an effect. A survey released in February by Technomic, Inc., a food-service consultant, found that 86 percent of restaurant-goers said they were surprised at the calories counts listed. The information is affecting what many consumers order, and even what restaurants they frequent.

One hope behind the regulation is that not only will consumers make better choices, but restaurants will begin offering more lower-calorie options. That combination very well could stem the rising tide of obesity — and obesity-related diseases — across America.

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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By Martha Filipic
(614) 292-9833
filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu

Editor:
This column was reviewed by Julie Shertzer, registered dietitian and program specialist for Ohio State University Extension in the Department of Human Nutrition, in the College of Education and Human Ecology.

**Section of Communications and Technology
News and Media Relations**
2021 Coffey Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1044
(614) 292-2011

208 Research Services
Building
1680 Madison Ave.
Wooster, OH 44691-4096
(330) 263-3780

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Keith L. Smith, Ph.D., Associate Vice President for Agricultural Administration and Director, Ohio State University Extension
TDD No. 800-589-8292 (Ohio only) or 614-292-1868