FACTS
Downsizing the Epidemic
Menu Labeling in Restaurants

OVERVIEW
Our nation is in the grips of an obesity epidemic. Too many people are taking in too many calories and are not physically active. The combination can be deadly, leading not only to obesity, but a higher risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer, and early death or disability. The American Heart Association believes that educated consumers, armed with the right nutrition information, can make healthier choices when they are eating out. Better menu labeling can also inspire restaurant industry innovation. While the Nutrition Facts Label on packaged goods listing key nutrient information such as calories has been available since 1994, the same details are not provided on most restaurant menus, menu boards, or foods sold in venues for immediate consumption, such as movie theaters, sport arenas, and grocery store delis.

Now, that is changing. With passage of the health reform law in March 2010, restaurants with 20 or more locations will be required to post calories on menus and menu boards, including boards at drive through service, and make other nutrition information available in the restaurant. To put this information in context with overall diet, restaurants are required to include a daily calorie intake statement. In addition, vending machine operators with more than 20 machines must also post calories on or next to the machines.

The AHA has advocated for swift, strong implementation of these regulations. Ultimately, it would be in the interest of public health to have calorie labeling mandated in all restaurants. Restaurants not covered by the federal law remain subject to any state and local regulations, and the Association will work to ensure that restaurants with fewer than 20 locations adopt menu labeling as well.

MORE AMERICANS ARE EATING OUT
Americans spend nearly half (46%) of their food budget on foods eaten away from home. As a result, it is all the more important for consumers to have nutritional information available in order to make healthy food choices at restaurants, just as they do in a grocery store. Some of the factors driving this need include:

- Foods eaten away from home are typically served in larger portion sizes and may have more calories than those eaten at home.
- The daily calorie statement required under the federal law may have a positive effect on consumer food choices: helping them understand how many calories they should eat in a day.
- A study with college students showed that calorie labeling on entrees led to selection of entrees with lower calories without reducing overall sales revenue.
- In Washington, adding caloric and nutrient information on the menus at full-service restaurants resulted in consumers purchasing entrees lower in calories, fat, and sodium.
- Menu labeling may lead to parents choosing lower-calorie restaurant meals for their children.
- Some studies suggest that the food service industry may respond to mandatory labeling by producing healthier options to expand their customer base and increase sales.

Additional research upon implementation of the federal menu labeling law will reveal more about the impact of menu labeling on consumer choices and industry innovation.

SERIOUS HEALTH CONSEQUENCES
Research documents the link between more frequent eating out and increased body weight. Obesity is not only a major health risk factor but it threatens to reverse all of the improvements in cardiovascular health made over the last fifty years. Indeed, with Americans eating over 30% of their daily caloric intake outside of the home, adverse health consequences – such as Type 2 diabetes, high cholesterol and high blood pressure – have begun to emerge.

SETTING A STELLAR EXAMPLE
As federal menu labeling law is put into practice, it will be important to learn from states and cities that have already implemented similar laws. New York City (NYC) led the way by launching a robust menu labeling initiative in late spring of 2008. The NYC Board of Health requires all restaurant chains with at
least 15 stores to list calories per serving next to each food item on the menu or menu board. NYC conducted an accompanying education campaign to teach consumers about calories and continues to monitor and evaluate the program.

It was initiatives like NYC and increasing momentum for menu labeling across the country – such as in Philadelphia and the state of California – that provided the impetus for the federal legislation.

Research in NYC about the impact on consumer behavior and industry response has provided valuable information. Initial consumer reaction to the NYC regulation was very promising:

- Eighty-six percent of consumers thought it was a positive move;
- Eighty-four percent said they read the calories on menus;
- Ninety-seven percent said that calories were higher than they expected; and
- Seventy-seven percent said that restaurants have a responsibility to respond to consumers’ nutritional concerns.

However, six months after implementation, one study found that only 27% of adults and 9% of adolescents in NYC were both reading and considering the posted nutrition information when choosing their meals. Clearly, additional consumer education will be needed to ensure that federal menu labeling requirements lead to broader changes in consumer behavior.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

Standardizing calorie information on menus is easier for larger fast food chains, where food preparation and portion sizes are highly controlled. However, accurate nutrient composition databases and software for labeling are widely available and it is easier than ever before for all restaurants to calculate calorie content in menu offerings. No matter which restaurant customers choose, they need and deserve the calorie and nutrition information.

The ability of customers to customize ingredients in some of their meal selections does pose a challenge. However, for most food items, a close estimate of calories will provide consumers the information they need to make an informed and healthy choice.

ACTION PLAN FOR MENU LABELING

The American Heart Association will advocate for:

- Robust and timely implementation of the federal menu labeling law;
- An accompanying consumer education campaign to help people understand how many calories they should eat in a day to achieve or maintain a healthy weight;
- Monitor and evaluate menu and vending machine labeling initiatives; track consumer purchasing and consumption, industry innovation, and the impact on public health; and
- Assuring that menu labeling at the state and local level that addresses all restaurants not covered by the federal law display calorie counts on their menus and menu boards and offer nutrition information in a manner consistent with federal law.

References

15. Rules of the City of New York, Title 24, New York City Health Code x81.50.

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