FACTS
Downsizing the Epidemic
Menu Labeling in Restaurants

OVERVIEW
Too many Americans are overweight or obese. Too many people have unhealthy diets and do not get enough physical activity, both of which can affect risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and early mortality. 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 foods has been available since 1994, the same details are not provided on restaurant menus or fast food boards.

That is changing. With the passage of the Affordable Care Act, restaurants with 20 or more locations are 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, the American Heart Association advocates for swift, strong implementation of menu labeling in all restaurants. Restaurants not covered by the federal law remain subject to any state and local regulations, and the American Heart 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 (49%) 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:

- Many restaurant meals are high in calories, sodium, and saturated fat, and the portion size is large.

Mandatory menu labeling has been associated with healthier food choices. Without menu labels, consumers often underestimate the caloric content of fast food meals – especially large meals. Menu labeling may help parents choose lower-calorie restaurant meals for their children. Although it may not affect the nutritional content of fast-food options, menu labeling may motivate increased availability to healthier options.

Additional research upon implementation of the Affordable Care Act 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 obesity. Although Americans consumed fewer calories away from home from 2005 to 2010, the frequency is still too high and most are still not consuming enough fruits, vegetables and whole grains.

SETTING A STELLAR EXAMPLE
State and local governments that have already implemented similar menu-labeling laws can serve as an example for implementation of the federal requirements. New York City (NYC) launched a robust menu labeling initiative in late spring of 2008, which required all restaurant chains with at least 15 stores to list calories per serving next to each food item on the menu or menu board.

Similar initiatives have been passed in locales such as King County, WA (which includes Seattle), Philadelphia, and states such as California, Oregon, and Maine. Initial research on the King County, WA regulation showed significant increases in calorie information awareness and use.

MAKING IT HAPPEN
Standardizing calorie information on menus may be 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 which can make it easier 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.

**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.

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21. RiEs of the City of New York, Title 24, New York City Health Code s81.50.
22. King County Board of Health. RODR-02-2. 2010.
24. California Health and Safety Code: Chapter 4, Article 8, § 114094.

AHA/HPFS4/2015.