

How Calorie Counts on Menus Can Affect Your Health

 finance.yahoo.com/news/calorie-counts-menus-affect-health-130654554.html

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If you're unsure whether that scoop of mac and cheese from the Whole Foods buffet or that tub of popcorn from your local AMC theater will put you over your calorie limit for the day—wonder no more.

Starting Monday, food outlets with 20 or more locations in the U.S. must comply with Food and Drug Administration rules requiring them to list the calorie counts for meals, snacks, and, in some cases, alcohol on their menus and menu boards.

And it's not just sit-down restaurants: Amusement parks, bakeries, coffee shops, delis, drive-thrus, grocery stores, ice cream parlors, movie theaters, takeout and delivery chains, self-serve buffets, and even salad bars will have to bear calorie information, too.

"This is a victory for consumers," says Amy Keating, R.D., a dietitian at Consumer Reports. "Having the calories on menus gives consumers the opportunity to make informed choices, and while there are other nutrients to consider, it's a great start." (If you'd like to see more nutritional information—such as sugars, saturated fat, and sodium content—when ordering, food establishments must supply it in written form.)

You may have already noticed calorie information at some chains. Certain states and cities,

such as California, Philadelphia, and Vermont, have their own labeling laws. And some nationwide chains, such as Baskin-Robbins, Carl's Jr., Chick-fil-A, Dunkin' Donuts, Jamba Juice, McDonald's, Panera Bread, Starbucks, and Subway, were already voluntarily listing calories on their in-store menus and menu boards.

But now, after years of delays— the most recent of which was driven primarily by pressure from pizza delivery chains, such as Domino's Pizza, and trade groups representing convenience stores and independent grocers—calorie menu labeling rules are being enforced everywhere.

A Recipe for Healthier Eating?

Americans consume about a third of their food and drink calories away from home, according to the FDA. And a recent report by food and beverage market research firm The Hartman Group found that the majority of Americans believe they eat less healthfully when dining out.

“Our biggest challenge with overweight and obesity is that we are more and more sedentary and we have a food chain that's high in energy density [calories] and readily accessible to everyone in the U.S.,” says Eric R. Muth, Ph.D., a professor of psychology in the College of Behavioral, Social and Health Sciences at Clemson University.

Experts say that calorie labeling requirements are indeed a step in the right direction for improving consumer health, but research on exactly how they will influence people's eating decisions is largely mixed, Muth says.

Does menu labeling help you make better food choices at a restaurant, for example? Or will you still eat that 1,500-calorie sundae because, well, it's what you feel like?

Scientific studies on the topic are difficult to perform, Muth says, and because of that, there aren't many high-quality studies to answer this question. Still, there are some things we do know.

For one, experts say, people are notoriously bad at estimating the number of calories in foods. A small study of 55 people published in the journal *Appetite* in 2006, for example, found that volunteers tended to overestimate the number of calories in unhealthy foods (such as soda, french fries, and cookies) by 17 percent, and underestimate the number in healthy foods (such as salad, black beans, and fish) by 16 percent.

Even trained dietitians, Muth says, aren't great at estimating the exact number of calories they eat in a day.

And there is some evidence that giving people that information on menus may lead them to make healthier choices. In a recent review published by the independent Cochrane Collaboration, a team of nine scientists from the U.K. analyzed data from several previous

studies and found that diners choose meals that have between 8 and 12 percent fewer calories when menus include calorie information. While the study did have limitations, the authors note, it does suggest that mandating calorie labeling is still a worthwhile endeavor.

And, Muth says, it might change the food landscape for the better by forcing chains and food manufacturers to think more closely about what they're putting into foods, rather than focusing mainly on taste and cost.

"If we don't fix the food chain, it becomes up to the individual to stop putting what the food chain is supplying into your mouth," Muth says.

Making Thoughtful Swaps

Whether you're at a salad bar or a coffee joint, calorie counts on menus can help you compare items quickly, using hard numbers rather than your gut to make a snap decision. For example, that double bacon cheeseburger may not seem so appealing at 1,200 calories when there's a 600-calorie option listed right beside it.

To see how you can use calorie labeling on menus to make lower-calorie choices, here are two offerings from eight national chains that are similar in flavor but wildly different in calories. We gathered all calorie information from the chains' websites.

(If you're reading this article on your smartphone, we recommend that you rotate it to landscape mode to view the tables below better.)

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	Higher Calorie	Calories	Lower Calorie	Calories	Portion Size
Baskin-Robbins	Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough Ice Cream in a Waffle Cone	340	Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough Ice Cream in a Cake Cone	205	2.5-oz. scoop
Cinemark	Super Nachos	990	Regular Nachos	550	1 portion
Domino's Pizza	Cali Chicken Bacon Ranch Pizza	800	Bacon, Chicken, and Cheese Pizza	640	2 slices of large 14" hand-tossed pie

Dunkin' Donuts	Sausage, Egg, and Cheese on a Croissant	700	Sausage, Egg, and Cheese Wake-Up Wrap	290	1 sandwich or wrap
Jamba Juice	Mango Chia Omega Smoothie with Greek Yogurt	470	Mega Mango Smoothie	340	1 medium smoothie
McDonald's	Triple Cheeseburger	520	Cheeseburger	300	1 burger
Starbucks	Ultra Caramel Frappuccino (whole milk, whipped cream)	420	Caramel Frappuccino Blended Coffee (whole milk, no whipped cream)	280	1 grande
Subway	Spicy Italian	480	Cold Cut Combo	360	1 6" sandwich

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