



Menu Labeling in Chain Restaurants

Opportunities for Public Policy



RUDD REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

Eating out is no longer an occasional indulgence. Americans spend almost half their food dollars on foods made outside the home. Fast-food chains are particularly popular because they are convenient and relatively inexpensive and their menus appeal to a wide cross-section of the population. Americans now consume about a third of their calories from fast-food restaurants and food service vendors. This upward trend is coincident with rising rates of diabetes, heart disease, and obesity.

Most people are unaware of the number of calories or the amount of fat, sodium, or sugar in a typical fast-food meal. Putting nutrition information on menus and menu boards has been proposed to make it more available to consumers. Proponents say consumers deserve to be fully informed about the products they buy—from clothing to cleaning supplies, to food.

Many restaurant chains already have this information, but they often display it on websites or posters that may not be readily accessible when consumers are deciding what to eat. Menu labeling policies would give people the information at the time of purchase. Such policies have been passed in several major cities; they have been proposed federally and in several states as well.

This Rudd Report presents information to assist policymakers and interested citizens in determining whether menu labeling is a viable alternative for their constituents and communities. It provides a stand-alone fact sheet, and gives an example of calorie information with a menu labeling policy, public opinion polling data, arguments for and against a policy, and a compilation of relevant scientific studies.

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MENU LABELING FACT SHEET

WHAT IS MENU LABELING?

Menu labeling places nutrition information such as calories, and fat, carbohydrate, and sodium content on a restaurant’s menu or menu board so it can be considered by the customer before placing an order. An example is shown on the right.

WHY IT IS BEING CONSIDERED

Proponents say menu labeling:

- **Will inform consumers** about the nutritional content of meals they purchase at chain restaurants.
- **Will put the information where consumers may be more likely to see it**, such as on a menu or menu board rather than on a website or poster.
- **Can help consumers make different choices.**
People may choose meals lower in fat and calories if the information is available where they place their order. Many people today must limit salt, fat, or carbohydrate intake because of heart disease, diabetes, obesity, or other health issues.
- **Will make the information universally available.**
Currently, about half of chain restaurants do not offer this information at all.
- **May give people more control of their diets and weight.**
People eat out more often, consuming “supersized” portions that have come to look normal. Menu labeling may help consumers control the amount of calories and fat they consume and may be beneficial in reducing obesity levels.

HOW WILL MENU LABELING AFFECT RESTAURANTS AND CUSTOMERS?

Opponents say it:

- Will be too costly for chains to analyze their menu items, which are constantly changing.
- Is unnecessary because the information is available on websites and sometimes on posters and in other places in restaurants.
- Is not the role of government to regulate this information.
- Could result in loss of business.
- Will not result in a reduction of caloric intake by customers.

POLLS INDICATE THAT CONSUMERS WANT THIS INFORMATION

- National public opinion polls show that up to 83 percent of Americans favor menu labeling.
- Three out of four adults read food labels on packages; half say this helped them change their purchasing habits.



IS THERE GOVERNMENT PRECEDENT FOR MANDATING LABELING?

- Federal law requires manufacturers to disclose nutrition information on packaged food, and ingredient information on clothing, cleaning products, and cosmetics.

IS MENU LABELING NECESSARY?

- Many people, even nutrition professionals, underestimate the number of calories in fast-food meals.
- When people eat out, they tend to consume more calories and fat, and fewer vegetables, fruits, and fiber.
- Americans spend almost half of their food dollars on food made outside the home.

WILL MENU LABELING HELP COMBAT THE OBESITY EPIDEMIC?

While the answer to this question is not yet definitive, a health impact assessment done in Los Angeles County suggests it may: If menu labeling helped 10 percent of chain restaurant patrons reduce their average meal by 100 calories, it could prevent close to 40 percent of the average annual 6.75 million pound weight gain in the county population.

EXAMPLES OF CALORIE INFORMATION

Restaurant	Food item	Calories	
Arby's	Sausage, egg, and cheese breakfast wrap	689	
	Ham and cheese breakfast croissant	281	
Dairy Queen	Dipped cone, chocolate, medium	490	
	Vanilla cone, medium	340	
Denny's	Western burger with fries	1580	
	Classic burger	780	
	Side of French fries, 5 oz.	423	
	Side of coleslaw, 5 oz.	260	
Domino's Pizza	Classic hand-tossed 12" pizza crust, 1 serving	160	
	Crunchy thin 12" pizza crust, 1 serving	80	
KFC	Extra crispy chicken breast, 162 g	440	
	Original Recipe chicken breast, 161 g	360	
McDonald's	Value Meal: Double Cheeseburger (440 calories) Small fries (230 calories) 16. oz. Coke (150 calories)	820 total	
	Cheeseburger (300 calories) Small fries (230 calories) 32 oz. iced tea with 2 teaspoons sugar (30 calories)	560 total	
	Large fries	500	
	32 oz. chocolate Triple-Thick Shake	1160	
	McDonald's Happy Meals	Chicken McNuggets, 4 pieces Small Fries 1% lowfat white milk, 8 oz.	520 total
		Chicken McNuggets, 4 pieces Apple Dippers with Low-Fat Caramel Dip 1% lowfat white milk, 8 oz.	395 total
Starbuck's	Iced white chocolate mocha with whipped cream, grande	450	
	Iced vanilla latte, grande	190	
Subway	Jared Salad Sweet Onion Chicken Teriyaki	210	
	Jared Salad Oven Roasted Chicken Breast	140	
Taco Bell	Grilled Stuft Burrito—Chicken	640	
	Spicy Chicken Burrito	400	

MENU LABELING OPINION POLL RESULTS

National Polls	Source	% Support/Agree
Fast-food and other chain restaurants should list nutrition information on menus and menu boards.	Caravan Opinion Research Corporation (2008) 1,003 respondents	78
Nutrition information for all items served should be listed on menu boards.	Technomic Inc.'s Nutritrack Consumer Nutrition Insights online survey (2007) 2,500 respondents	74
Restaurants should make nutrition information available for all menu items.	ARAMARK Corporation (2005) 5,297 respondents	83
Support putting calorie information on menu boards at fast-food restaurants.	Advertising Age (2005)	72
Support requiring fast-food restaurants to display the calorie content of their foods on menus and menu boards.	Global Strategy Group (2003)	67
State/County Polls	Source	% Support/Agree
Support or oppose requiring fast-food and chain restaurants to display calorie content on menus or menu boards.	End Hunger CT/ Center for Survey Research & Analysis, Univ. CT (2007) 501 respondents	82
Support or oppose requiring fast-food and chain restaurants to post nutritional information, such as caloric, fat, and sugar content, on their menus.	California Center for Public Health Advocacy/Field Research Corp (2007) 538 respondents	84
Somewhat or strongly support providing nutrition information on menus or menu boards.	King County, Washington (2007) 599 respondents	65
Support requiring restaurants to list nutrition information, such as calories, on menus.	Harvard Forums on Health (2003) 1,002 respondents	62

ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST MENU LABELING

Opponents say:	Proponents say:
<p>Consumers do not want or need this information.</p>	<p>Public opinion polls indicate that the majority of Americans want chain restaurants to post nutrition information on menus and menu boards. For example, one national poll indicated that 83 percent of people polled supported nutrition labeling.</p>
<p>People just need more willpower to pick the carrot sticks rather than the french fries.</p>	<p>It is not a matter of willpower, but empowerment. If people were made aware of nutrition in chain restaurant food, they could choose meals with fewer calories and less fat.</p>
<p>If customers want nutrition information, they can consult the posters, brochures, websites, or kiosks that are available.</p>	<p>People need the information when they order to help make their selection. People are less likely to access or use it if it is on a website, tray liner, or sign in a back hall.</p>
<p>People already know what is healthy and can estimate calories and fat on their own.</p>	<p>Estimating nutrition information is tricky and people tend to underestimate the calorie and fat content of foods. One poll found that even experienced nutrition professionals underestimate the calories in restaurant food.</p>
<p>Most people do not know and cannot guess how many calories they need every day; they are not interested in the information.</p>	<p>Three out of four American adults use food labels on packaged foods. For those who cannot guess, menu labeling would be informative.</p>
<p>It is not the government’s role to regulate how chain restaurants give customers nutrition information. People can find it for themselves.</p>	<p>Government requires many businesses to disclose what is in their products; and consumers expect the information in many contexts.</p>
<p>Providing nutrition information on menus is not the solution to obesity. It is a complex problem requiring complex solutions including attention to education, diet, and physical activity.</p>	<p>Yes, obesity is a complex problem caused by many factors. Menu labeling can be part of the solution, giving people information they need to fight a challenging battle.</p>

ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST MENU LABELING, *CONT.*

Opponents say:

Menu labeling is a violation of an individual’s freedom to eat what he or she chooses. The government should not assume this role.

Menu labeling is not feasible because of constantly changing specials and because people special-order many meals.

Customers at chain restaurants, especially fast-food chains, expect speedy service. Service will slow if customers are reading nutrition information.

Menu labeling will cost too much, and put restaurants—especially small ones—out of business.

Menu boards and menus will have to be changed too frequently because of specials.

Proponents say:

Menu labeling simply offers people information about the food they are about to buy. They remain free to choose whatever they wish to eat.

Menu labeling applies only to standard items (for example, a McDonald’s Big Mac). If people ask for special orders, they at least have basic information such as how many calories are in a regular hamburger.

Most policies mandate that nutrition information be written in font sizes equal to other information on the menu boards so it will be as visible as the portion sizes or prices. People can look at all the information as they wait in line, and be ready to choose once they reach the cash register.

This is not a cost-prohibitive measure and many chain restaurants already analyze the nutritional contents of their menus. Changing menu boards is a one-time cost. The current and proposed policies only apply to chains, not small mom-and-pop restaurants that might not be able to afford it.

Menu labeling applies to standard items that appear on the menu for a predetermined number of days per year. This would not, therefore, apply to specials which might appear only briefly.

Many chains periodically update their menus and menu boards for marketing purposes and to change prices. They could change nutrition information at the same time.

SCIENTIFIC STUDIES RELATED TO MENU LABELING

Issue	Evidence Summary
<p>More people are eating out at fast-food restaurants and the number of fast-food restaurants is growing.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Quick-service restaurant sales in the United States are projected to increase by 4.4 percent in 2008, with sales of \$156.8 billion.¹ ▪ There are approximately 266,300 fast-food restaurants in the country. That number is expected to increase to almost 287,500 by 2009.² ▪ In 2006, Americans spent almost half (48 percent) of their food dollars on foods made outside the home, in comparison to 26 percent in 1970.³ ▪ Fast-food is eaten disproportionately by low-income people, who are more likely to be overweight.⁴
<p>Portion sizes are bigger, and people are consuming more calories when eating out.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Standard portion sizes in fast-food and chain restaurants have grown since the 1970s: Typical soft drink servings have increased by 49 calories, french fries servings have increased by 68 calories and hamburgers by 97 calories.^{5,6} ▪ People eat more at a restaurant than at home.⁷ ▪ Adults eating at fast-food restaurants consume 205 more calories per day than those who do not eat out; children consume 155 more calories.⁸ ▪ A survey of 7318 diners at fast-food restaurants in New York City found that one third purchased 1,000 calories or more for a lunchtime meal.⁹ ▪ Children consume almost twice (1.8 times) as many calories when eating food made outside the home, compared to eating at home.¹⁰ ▪ Fast-food restaurants use marketing to give the impression that the larger portion sizes are “normal.” The prices on much larger portion sizes increase only slightly, which leads customers to make unhealthy choices.¹¹ ▪ Americans’ average calorie intake increased by almost 200 calories per day between 1977 (average: 1,791 calories) and 1996 (average: 1,985). Restaurants and fast-food accounted for the fastest growing source of those calories.¹²
<p>Excess fast-food calorie consumption may contribute to weight gain.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A national survey conducted between 1977 and 1996 showed that calorie consumption from restaurant fast-food doubled as a percentage of energy intake for people over the age of 2.¹³ ▪ Eating extra calories while eating out contributes to excess energy intake.^{14,15} ▪ Eating out more frequently at fast-food restaurants is associated with a higher total intake of energy.¹⁶ ▪ In a study of more than 4,700 children between 11 and 18 years, boys who ate fast-food regularly consumed 800 extra calories per week, and girls consumed an extra 660 calories per week. This could add a weight gain of 10 or more pounds per year.¹⁷ ▪ Eating more calories away from home causes an increase in weight.^{18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23} ▪ There is strong evidence of a causal association between eating fast-food and gaining weight. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fast-food intake was associated with increased body weight in a study of 3,031 adults.²⁴ ▪ More days of fast-food intake at baseline predicted increases in body mass index after five years, in a study of 10,000 adolescents.²⁵ ▪ Fast-food intake increased the prevalence of overweight by 27-31 percent in a study of over 9,000 adults²⁶ ▪ Adolescents between 12 and 19 who ate foods away from home were more likely to have a higher body mass index.²⁷

SCIENTIFIC STUDIES, *CONT.*

Issue	Evidence Summary
<p>People are unaware of how many calories are in their meals.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Restaurant goers underestimate the calories, and overestimate the healthfulness of menu items.^{28, 29, 30} ▪ In a poll of 523 adults, only 11 percent could identify which of four choices from Denny’s and McDonald’s were highest in calories.³¹ ▪ A study found that 9 out of 10 people underestimated the number of calories of less-healthy items by an average of more than 600 calories.³² ▪ In a poll, experienced nutrition professionals underestimated the number of calories in restaurant food by 200 to 600 calories.³³
<p>Consumers want and use nutrition information.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Three out of four American adults use food labels on packaged foods.³⁴ Seventy-three percent say that they look at the calorie information on the Nutrition Facts Panel.³⁵ ▪ Almost half (48 percent) of American adults say reading the nutrition information on food labels made them change their purchasing habits.³⁶ ▪ When given nutrition information on food served in restaurants, diners are 24 to 37 percent less likely to choose high-calorie menu items.³⁷ ▪ A study in New York City showed that the fast-food customers who saw calorie information displayed bought 52 fewer calories than those who didn’t see the information.³⁸ ▪ A majority (62 to 87 percent) of consumers in six nationally representative polls said they support requiring restaurants to list nutrition information.^{39, 40}
<p>Posting calorie information may encourage chains to improve the nutritional content of their menus.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Processed food manufacturers have reformulated many of their products to contain less trans fat following the Food and Drug Administration mandate to list trans fat content on the Nutrition Facts Panel of foods sold in retail stores.⁴¹
<p>Some, but not all, fast-food restaurants make nutrition information available. The information is not always accessible to customers at the point of purchase or ordering.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ In McDonald’s outlets in Washington, DC, 59 percent provided in-store nutrition information for the majority of their standard menu items; 40 percent did not provide it. In 62% of the restaurants, it was necessary to ask two or more employees in order to obtain a copy of the information.⁴² ▪ In New York City, 95 percent of survey respondents did not notice nutrition information provided by McDonald’s because it was not prominently displayed at the point of purchase. It was on brochures, placemats, food wrappers, or on the Internet.⁴³ ▪ In a study of 300 of the largest chain restaurants, 54 percent made some nutrition information available; 44 percent had information on the majority of standard menu items; 86 percent provided the information on a website.⁴⁴
<p>These leading health authorities and national organizations recommend addressing the lack of calorie information in restaurants.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ AARP.⁴⁵ ▪ American Cancer Society.⁴⁶ ▪ American Diabetes Association.⁴⁷ ▪ American Heart/Stroke Association.⁴⁸ ▪ American Medical Association.⁴⁹ ▪ American Public Health Association.⁵⁰ ▪ Institute of Medicine.⁵¹ ▪ Society for Nutrition Education.⁵² ▪ The United States Food and Drug Administration’s Obesity Working Group.⁵³

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