

Full disclosure: People will make healthier choices if restaurants provide nutritional data

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As more and more Americans eat meals outside the home, the country also faces an epidemic of obesity. An association between eating out and weight-related diseases has led to demands for nutritional labeling of restaurant foods. A new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* examines the potential benefits of such labeling.

"Using only the sense of taste, smell, and sight to accurately estimate the levels of calories, saturated fat, trans fat, and sodium found in a typical restaurant food serving is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for most consumers," write authors Elizabeth Howlett (University of Arkansas), Scot Burton (Sam M. Walton College of Business), Kenneth Bates (University of San Diego), and Kyle Huggins (James Madison University).

The authors set out to examine how providing calorie and nutrient information on restaurant menus and menu boards influences consumers' food-related evaluations and choices. They looked at how participants' prior expectations came into play and whether providing calorie and nutrient information after the consumptive experience changed their subsequent [food choices](#).

The researchers found that providing nutritional information can influence subsequent [food consumption](#), especially when consumers' expectations are not fulfilled when they examine the information.

"When a 'great taste' claim was used to describe a restaurant menu item, the provision of calorie information did not affect consumers' perceptions, presumably because foods that claim great taste are typically expected to be relatively high in calories," the authors explain. "On the other hand, when a 'low calorie' claim was presented but the menu item was higher in calories than expected, the provision of nutritional information increased the perceived likelihood of 1) gaining weight and 2) developing heart disease."

The study shows that nutritional information can help consumers moderate their eating over time. In one study, participants ate a sandwich that they later found was unexpectedly high in calories. After this discovery, the participants consumed fewer snacks throughout the rest of the day.

More information: Elizabeth Howlett, Scot Burton, Kenneth Bates, and Kyle Huggins. "Coming to a Restaurant Near You: Potential Consumer Responses to Nutritional Information Disclosure on Menus." *Journal of Consumer Research*: October 2009.

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