

FDA proposes more calorie count information

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In this July 31, 2008 file photo, customers view the menu in the drive through line at a Burger King in Portland, Ore., Like it or not, many restaurant diners will soon know more about what they are eating under menu labeling requirements proposed Friday by the Food and Drug Administration. The requirements will force chain restaurants with 20 or more locations, along with bakeries, grocery stores, convenience stores and coffee chains, to clearly post the amount of calories in each item on menus, both in restaurants and drive-through lanes. The new rules will also apply to vending machines where calorie information isn't already visible on the package. (AP Photo/Don Ryan, File)

(AP) -- It could get harder to indulge in a double cheeseburger and fries without feeling guilty.

Menu labeling requirements proposed Friday by the Food and Drug

Administration will require chain restaurants with 20 or more locations, along with bakeries, grocery stores, convenience stores and coffee chains, to clearly post the calorie count for each item on their menus.

"We've got a huge obesity problem in this country and it's due in part to excess calorie consumption outside the home," says Mike Taylor, FDA deputy commissioner for foods. "Consumers generally when you ask them say they would prefer to have that information."

The new rules will apply to menus, both in restaurants and drive-through lanes. They will also apply to vending machines if calorie information isn't already visible on the package.

The calorie counts will apply to an estimated 280,000 establishments and could be on menus by 2012. Required as part of health overhaul legislation signed into law last year, they are designed to give restaurant diners information that has long been available on packaged goods cooked at home. The FDA estimates that a third of calories are consumed by eating out.

But don't expect calorie shock when ordering at the movie theater, where a tub of popcorn can contain well north of a thousand calories - movie theaters are exempt, along with airplanes, bowling alleys and other businesses whose primary business is not to sell food, according to the FDA. Movie theaters pushed to be left out after guidelines published last year included them.

Alcohol will also be exempted, according to the agency. Margo Wootan, director of nutrition policy at the advocacy group Center for Science in the Public Interest, says that could be misleading to consumers.

"I think it's going to be confusing if customers see the calories for soft drinks and juice labeled on the menu but not other drinks such as beer

and wine," she said. "It will make it seem like they are better choices."

Still, Wootan says the guidelines are a positive step.

"You won't have to get out of line and go back to some poster by the bathroom and look at some item in a tiny font size," she says. "It will be right there on the menu where you are getting your other information about what to order."

The idea is to make sure that customers process the calorie information as they are figuring out what to eat. Many restaurants currently post nutritional information in a hallway, on a hamburger wrapper or on their website. The new law will make calories immediately available for most items.

Menus and menu boards will also tell diners that a 2,000-calorie diet is used as the basis for general nutrition advice, noting that individual calorie needs may vary.

The labeling requirements were added to the health bill with the support of the restaurant industry, which is facing a smattering of laws from cities and states. New York City was the first in the country to put a calorie posting law in place. Since then, California, Seattle and other places have done so.

Dawn Sweeney, president and CEO of the National Restaurant Association, said the calorie postings will provide customers with consistent information.

"The new standard," she said, "will help chain restaurants provide the same type of nutrition information to consumers in any part of the country."

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