

# Calorie information in fast food restaurants used by 40 percent of 9-18 year olds when making food choices

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A new study published online today (Thursday) in the *Journal of Public Health* has found that of young people who visited fast food or chain restaurants in the U.S. in 2010, girls and youth who were obese were more likely to use calorie information given in the restaurants to inform their food choices. It also found that young people eating at fast food or chain restaurants twice a week or more were half as likely to use calorie information as those eating there once a week or less.

[Childhood obesity](#) has tripled in recent decades. One potential contributing factor is fast food, which is generally higher in calories, salt, and fat than home-cooked food. To help consumers make informed decisions while eating out, policies requiring restaurants to provide calorie and other [nutritional information](#) at the point of sale have been passed in some U.S. jurisdictions. A U.S. federal law that requires restaurants with at least 20 locations nationally to list [calorie information](#) next to menu items, and to place prominent information about suggested daily calorific intake on menus has been written into law, but has not yet been implemented.

Dr. Holly Wethington and colleagues of the U.S. [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)'s Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity, studied a sample of 721 American youth aged 9 to 18 years through mail surveys in Autumn 2010. Respondents were asked, "When calorie information is available at a fast food/chain restaurant, how often

does this information help you decide what to order?" They were also asked for their age, gender, height, weight, and how often they ate in fast food/chain restaurants.

The sample had a higher proportion of boys (56.4%) and a higher proportion of [respondents](#) were aged 12-14 years (32.2%). Most youth had a healthy weight as assessed by [BMI](#) (65.8%), while 13.3% were classified as obese. Of those who reported eating at fast food/chain restaurants, 65.6% reported going once a week or less, while 34.4% said they went two or more times a week. When asked about using calorie information when it was available, 42.4% of youth reported using it, while 57.6% reported never using it. Youth who reported they never eat at fast food or chain restaurants (about 8%) or who reported they never noticed calorie information (about 20%) were excluded from the analysis.

The study found that girls were 80% more likely to report using calorie information at fast food/chain restaurants than boys, and that obese youth were about 70% more likely to report using calorie information than those at a healthy weight. Unfortunately, those youth who ate at fast food/chain restaurants twice a week or more were 50% less likely to report using calorie information than those eating there once a week or less.

Lead author Dr. Wethington said, "Our findings are important given the high prevalence of obesity among youth and the adverse health effects associated with obesity. It is encouraging that a large number of youth, particularly youth who are obese, reported using the calorie information. This may have potential to lead to improved food and beverage choices as a way to manage weight, although more research is needed to assess whether youth know how many calories they should consume in a day given their activity level.

"Public health practitioners, school nutrition services, retailers, and other interested groups can consider implementing complementary education programmes to improve youth's understanding of calorie information to hopefully make calorie labeling part of a successful weight management strategy."

Professor Lindsey Davies, President of the UK Faculty of Public Health, on behalf of who the *Journal of Public Health* is published, commented: "This welcome research adds to our understanding of young people and their [food choices](#). It's good news that some young people want to understand more about the food they're eating and are using calorie information when they eat in fast food [restaurants](#). But to tackle obesity effectively, we need to know more about why so many [young people](#) do eat fast food so often. There are some things which can be done now and which we know will make a difference. We'd like the government to play its part in improving people's health by banning trans fats, which are found in many types of [fast food](#), have no nutritional value and increase the risk of heart disease."

**More information:** 'Use of calorie information at fast food and chain restaurants among US youth aged 9-18 years, 2010' by Holly Wethington, Leah Maynard, Heidi M. Blanck, *Journal of Public Health*, [DOI: 10.1093/pubmed/fdt049](https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdt049)

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