

New food labels bring revised calorie information

December 30 2014, by Melissa Wdowik, PhD, Rdn

If you are like most Americans, you eat one-third of your calories away from home. This includes meals at restaurants, snacks from vending machines, drinks at coffee shops and foods from convenience stores. With weight loss being the most popular New Year's resolution in this country, the Food and Drug Administration's new calorie labeling rules may come in handy.

The first rule requires restaurants to provide calorie and other nutrition information for standard menu items, including self-serve food. This rule also applies to food trucks, movie theaters, pizza places and amusement parks, as long as the company has at least 20 locations. The second rule requires [calorie information](#) for food sold from [vending machines](#), helping consumers to see the often high calorie level in relatively small portions. Alcoholic beverages will get visibility as well. You might not realize your pre-dinner cocktail has more calories than your meal; now you will at least have the facts to make informed decisions.

Allowing consumers to make informed decisions is the whole purpose of these new rules. If you want to balance your calories throughout the day to maintain a healthy weight, prevent or manage a chronic condition (think diabetes or heart disease) or ensure you are getting the right fuel for an active lifestyle, the new labels will be both informative and motivating. Let's take an example. An average meal at a sit-down restaurant contains more than 800 calories, while a typical drink contains 200 calories. To put the numbers into context, consider:

- Active young adults need 2,000 to 3,000 calories/day
- Healthy adults ages 30 to 70 need around 1,500 to 2,000 calories/day
- Older adults need between 1,200 and 1,800 calories/day

If you are an active adult male, that restaurant meal and drink adds up to half of your daily calories. If you are an inactive adult female, the meal provides almost 70 percent of your daily calorie needs. These are the kinds of numbers you need to know in order to avoid taking in extra calories day after day.

Obviously there is a great deal of variability depending on your age, gender, size and activity level, and many computer sites and phone apps exist to help you calculate your specific needs. But as a general rule of thumb, menus and menu boards will state that 2,000 calories a day is the average recommendation. Based on this, use the new labels to guide you in distributing your calories into 500-600 calories per meal (breakfast, lunch and dinner) and 100-200 [calories](#) per snack (mid-morning and mid-afternoon).

Using these numbers on a practical level, you may decide to omit your morning coffee drink, or keep the coffee drink and forgo the soda with lunch; eat just one pastry out of a package of two; eat a smaller portion of pasta; take half of your restaurant meal home for leftovers; skip the vending machine cookies; or order a small burger instead of a value meal.

While some chain restaurants already post their calorie counts, the law makes it mandatory for the rest to post by December 2015. In the meantime, use your best judgment to decrease your portion sizes along with your health risk and waistline.

Provided by Colorado State University

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