

Few heed restaurant calorie postings, but numbers are growing

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Two years after the calorie content of menu items first started appearing on the menus of Seattle chain restaurants, just 1 in 4 customers who frequented those establishments said they used that nutritional information to guide their consumption choices, a new study finds.

In addition, roughly 4 in 10 customers acknowledged they didn't even notice the new information.

But before you conclude that posting the caloric value of restaurant food is a virtually worthless exercise, consider this: In the months just before Seattle's calorie-posting experiment began, only 8 percent of customers eating at chain outlets said they took the [calorie content](#) of their favorite foods into account when making their orders. And 18.6 percent reported that they even saw [calorie counts](#) on serving boards and menus.

That's actually progress: over 2 { years, Seattle's calorie-posting experiment tripled the percentage of people who saw useful new information on menus—from 18.6 percent in May 2008 to 59.4 percent in December 2010. In the same period, the proportion of consumers who let those calorie counts inform their ordering decisions also tripled—from 8.1 percent to 24.8 percent.

The new research, published Tuesday in the *American Journal of Public Health*, is not the first to suggest that calorie posting—now the law of the land—has failed to wean a nation of fast-food diners off their triple-bacon cheeseburgers or prompted a boycott of calorific coffee concoctions.

But it does offer the longest look available at this point in the evolution of Americans' behavior when they are provided some key information about the food choices before them. While calorie posting is now required by federal law at most chain restaurants and eateries across the country, King County, Wash.-which encompasses the Seattle metropolitan area-was among the first local jurisdictions in the U.S. to require it.

Only New York City came before King County in adopting a regulation requiring most chain restaurants, coffee shops and snack bars to post the calorie contents of its menu offerings where ordering customers could see them. The King County Board of Health adopted the new regulations in March 2008, and they were broadly implemented on Jan. 1, 2009.

The new research found troubling disparities among King County diners' responses to calorie posting. Compared with white, affluent and better educated residents, the study found that minority populations, people with low incomes and those with a high school education or less were not as likely to take posted calories into account when ordering.

Women and respondents who were married or "partnered" were also more likely to take posted calories into account when making their orders.

Although there was no broad divide among different populations before the calorie posting initiative began, respondents who had household incomes of more than \$75,000 were more than twice as likely as those with incomes less than \$35,000 - 30 percent vs 12.5 percent - to consider posted calories when placing an order. Compared with those with a high school diploma or less, college graduates were also more than twice as likely to do so, 30 percent to 14.1 percent.

Those who are white were quicker to acknowledge that the new

information influenced their decisions than were respondents who identified themselves as nonwhite or Latino. By 2010, 25.8 percent said that they took into account an item's posted calorie content in deciding what to order. Among those identifying as nonwhite or Latino, 20.8 percent did.

Those disparities, said the study's lead author, were "not surprising." But she added they did underscore that researchers and [public health](#) officials must focus more on how best to inform the choices of minority populations, those with less money to spend, and those with more limited knowledge about nutrition.

The good news is that, over time, the effect of menu labeling grew among consumers in all those groups, said Roxana Chen, a social research scientist with the Seattle-King County Office of Public Health.

"All subgroups did experience increases in awareness and use" of the posted [calorie information](#), said Chen, who led the research project.

"What we see is that all boats were raised, but they weren't raised equally. It's not to say that people of color or lower-education groups didn't benefit. They just didn't benefit as much as did other groups who had better use of that information."

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