

Calorie consumption: Do numbers or graphics encourage diners to eat less?

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To encourage consumers to lower their caloric intake, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration now requires most chain restaurants to state the number of calories that each menu item contains. But is a number the only effective way of helping diners make low-calorie choices? No, says a new study in the *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*. According to the study, another popular way of indicating calorie information, an

image of a green, yellow, or red traffic light, can be just as effective.

"We find that either numbers or traffic lights have the same beneficial effect when it comes to taking in fewer calories," write the authors of the study, Eric M. VanEpps (Carnegie Mellon University), Julie S. Downs (Carnegie Mellon University), and George Loewenstein (Carnegie Mellon University). "In our particular study, either method resulted in food choices that contained 10 percent fewer calories."

To determine the effectiveness of numbers and traffic lights, the authors conducted a field experiment in which employees at Humana, a large health-care company, were asked to place lunch orders through an online platform designed especially for the study. A control group was given no [calorie information](#). In the experimental group, employees were given either the number of calories, a traffic light indicating the approximate number of calories (a green light, for instance, meant the fewest calories), or both.

The study provides the most promising evidence to date that providing calorie information, either through numbers or icons such as traffic lights, encourages diners to take in fewer [calories](#).

Although providing calorie information in the form of numbers may seem like the best option, policymakers should consider that not all consumers are adept at interpreting numbers. "For those consumers, traffic light labels can communicate basic 'eat this, not that' information regardless of their understanding of the underlying nutrients or ability to use numeric information," the authors write.

More information: Eric M. VanEpps, Julie S. Downs, and George Loewenstein. "Calorie Label Formats: Using Numbers or Traffic Lights to Reduce Lunch Calories." Forthcoming in the *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*. [dx.doi.org/10.1509/jppm.14.112](https://doi.org/10.1509/jppm.14.112)

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