

Did adding calorie counts to restaurant menus make meals healthier?

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(HealthDay)—Was your New Year's resolution to eat healthier? Try

ordering a recently added menu item at your favorite chain restaurant, instead of a long-time favorite.

That's because newer dishes served by large [restaurant](#) chains tend to contain [fewer calories](#) now that menus must list the calorie content of all items.

New research finds that menu items introduced after calorie labeling went into effect in 2018 contained about 25% fewer calories on average compared to dishes introduced before labeling.

"The nationwide rollout of these calorie labels appeared to prompt restaurants to introduce lower-calorie items to their menus," said lead scientist Anna Grummon, a research fellow in nutrition at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

A provision of the U.S. [Affordable Care Act](#) requires that restaurant chains with 20 or more U.S. locations must post the calorie content of prepared foods on menus alongside the item's price, researchers said in background notes.

Prior research has found that people eating out have cut their calories slightly—4% to 6% on average—in response to the new labeling, according to the paper.

But it hasn't been clear how the [restaurant industry](#) responded to the labeling requirement, in terms of shaking up their menus and offering lower-calorie options.

For this study, Grummon and her colleagues analyzed the calories of more than 35,300 menu items sold at 59 large chain restaurants in the United States between 2012 and 2019. The chains included such names as Qdoba, Chipotle, Burger King, IHOP, Dunkin Donuts and KFC, she

said.

The researchers found that restaurants didn't change their formula for existing menu items in the face of calorie labeling. Dishes that had been on the menu beforehand had the same calorie content going forward, according to the study published Dec. 30 in *JAMA Network Open*.

That didn't surprise Connie Diekman, a food and nutrition consultant in St. Louis and former president of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. She said there's little pressure on restaurants to change the content and the flavor of their perpetually popular offerings.

"Much of that, in my mind, is due to the fact that people are familiar with the quick-serve or fast-food restaurants," Diekman said. "They know what they like. They trust what they order. Therefore, they're happy with what's there and they're going to buy it no matter what the calorie label says."

But new dishes offered after menu labeling went into effect tended to contain an average 113 fewer calories, or about 25% less, than the calories of foods introduced before the requirement, the researchers reported.

"That suggests the labeling law is potentially leading to consumers having more lower-calorie options," Grummon said.

All told, the findings are encouraging to Diekman, who sees it as restaurants slowly guiding their patrons toward a [healthier diet](#).

"They're going to slowly introduce it to the consumer," Diekman said of healthier food options. "That's exciting, because they're not trying to force it down people's throats. They're going to walk with the consumer and help them change."

"Behavior change is a process. It's not an overhaul. They haven't jumped in and tried to scare the consumer, but at the same time they've recognized their opportunity and their responsibility," she continued.

Grummon believes that many folks eating out are using the calorie information.

"I do think that the transparency provided by the calorie labels is really helpful to consumers," Grummon said. "These labels are giving consumers information about foods they might want to order that was not easy to access before the law. Folks can decide how they want to use that information to meet their health goals."

People who want to eat out in a healthier way should review a restaurant's [menu](#) online beforehand and find a handful of items that look yummy and are lower-calorie, Diekman said. That way, you'll be aware of the more nutritious options available to you when you place your order.

You should look, in particular, for [menu items](#) marked "new item" or "seasonal option," since this study indicates those are more likely to be lower in calories, Diekman said.

"View it as a process. I'm going to try it today, see how I like it, and then I'll decide if the next time I want to try another new item or go back to my favorite," Diekman said.

She added that it's fine not to overthink the calorie content of your restaurant meal if you dine out infrequently.

Once in a while, it's OK to choose a higher-calorie item than you would normally eat, Diekman said. "The problem, of course, is when we do this every single day," she said.

More information: MenuStat has [calorie and nutrition information](#) from nearly 100 chain restaurants.

Anna H. Grummon et al, Changes in Calorie Content of Menu Items at Large Chain Restaurants After Implementation of Calorie Labels, *JAMA Network Open* (2021). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.41353](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.41353)

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