

New Rules Require Calorie Postings in Restaurant Menus

My family likes to eat out several times a month, but I've heard recently that many restaurant menu items contain plenty of calories. So how can we avoid eating too many calories when dining out?

One way of avoiding consuming a lot of calories when eating out is to first be aware of exactly how many calories are in the foods before you eat them.

Beginning May 5, that will be much easier for consumers to figure out. That's when the Food and Drug Administration will officially require restaurants with 20 or more locations to post nutritional information facts for their regular menu items, including beverages.

While some food establishments already provide calorie counts on their menus or menu boards, the new regulations will require all impacted restaurants nationwide to provide this information, as of that date.

The new rules, which are a part of the federal Affordable Care Act, will also require impacted restaurants to post a statement alerting consumers that other nutritional information is available on request, including information on total calories, calories from fat, total fat, saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, sodium, total carbohydrates, fiber, sugars, and protein for their regular menu items.

This is significant considering that 92 percent of 364 measured restaurant meals from both large-chain and non-chain restaurants exceed the recommended calorie requirements for a single meal, according to a study published last year in the Journal of the American Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

In fact, the study found that both chain and local restaurants routinely serve meals that contain more calories than should be consumed in a single meal. And that's often more than a person should eat in an entire day – even before the beverage or desert is included in the meal.

This is of concern because about half of consumers' annual food dollars are spent on foods prepared outside the home, including foods from restaurants and similar retail food establishments, according to the FDA. Many people simply don't know, or they underestimate, the calorie and nutrient content of these foods, FDA says.

However, there is some research suggesting that simply knowing how many calories are in foods isn't enough to stop people from overeating. A study published in the November 2015 issue of the journal, Health Affairs, found that calorie labels in New York City chain restaurants, on their own, have not reduced the overall number of calories that consumers of fast food order and presumably eat.

But, the study did find that 51 percent of survey respondents reported noticing the calorie counts, and 12 percent claimed that it influenced them to choose a lower-calorie item, even if it did not reduce overall caloric intake.

There are, however, steps that you can take to avoid overeating when dining out. These tips are offered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's ChooseMyPlate.gov website:

- Choose water, fat-free or low-fat milk, unsweetened tea, and other drinks without added sugars to drink.
- Start your meal with a salad packed with vegetables to help you feel satisfied sooner. Ask for dressing on the side and use a small amount of it.
- Share a main entree. Ask for small plates for everyone at the table.
- Order a side dish or an appetizer-sized portion instead of a regular entree. They're usually served on smaller plates and in smaller amounts.
- Pack fruit, sliced vegetables, low-fat string cheese or unsalted nuts to eat during road trips or long commutes. No need to stop for other food when these snacks are ready-to-eat.
- Fill your plate with vegetables and fruit. Stir-fries, kabobs or vegetarian menu items usually have more vegetables. Select fruits as a side dish or dessert.
- Compare the calories, fat, and sodium. Many menus now include nutrition information. Look for items that are lower in calories, saturated fat and sodium.
- Have an item from the menu and avoid the "all-you-can-eat" buffet. Steamed, grilled or broiled dishes have fewer calories than foods that are fried in oil or cooked in butter.
- Request 100 percent whole-wheat breads, rolls, and pasta when choosing sandwiches, burgers or main dishes.

And lastly, you don't have to eat the entire meal in one sitting. You may want to consider taking leftovers home in a container and chilling them in the refrigerator right away to eat at a later time. (Author: Turner, T. [2017]. *Chow Line is a service of the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences and its outreach and research arms, OSU Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center.*)

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