

Nutrition labeling in King County Restaurants

Heather Nakamura, MPE, MS, RD

What has the most calories... a Big Mac, two Sausage McGriddles, a large chocolate shake, or four hamburgers? If you guessed the Big Mac, you'd be wrong, along with the majority of the 500 Washington voters who took this quiz. The menu items actually stack up in the following order: Big Mac (540 calories), 2 Sausage McGriddles (840 calories), four hamburgers (1000 calories), 32 oz chocolate shake (1160 calories). The statewide poll, commissioned by the Center for Science in Public Interest (CSPI) showed that most people have a hard time guessing the calorie content of typical restaurant meals. Without access to nutrition information, it's virtually impossible to make informed decisions when dining out.

King County was the first jurisdiction in the nation to negotiate an agreement with the restaurant industry and institute legislation that ensures consumers have consistent access to nutrition information, at or prior to ordering. This legislation was prompted by the growing epidemic of obesity, diabetes and heart disease, and aimed at improving consumer food choices at restaurants and fast food locations. Restaurants will be required to display the calories, milligrams of sodium, and grams of saturated fat and carbohydrate for all menu items. The new regulation only applies to chain restaurants with 15 or more national locations, and excludes grocery and convenience stores. The new legislation also eliminates the requirement for trans fat labeling, since trans fats will be eliminated from all restaurants by February 2009.

King County began a three-phase implementation process August 1, 2008. Nutrition information can be listed on menus or menu boards, or made available through menu inserts, supplemental menus, or electronic kiosks available at each table. The process will include a public education campaign telling consumers to "Be Informed, Be Healthy", with the final phase introducing nutrition information to drive-through menus in King County completed in August 2009.

As a nutritionist, this sounds like great news, but will this information actually affect consumer choices? According to a recent Seattle Times article, consumers interviewed at fast food restaurants during the past month didn't even notice the posted nutrition information. Others were unaffected by the information and proceeded to make the same choices. Restaurant owners have reported that sales haven't changed since the nutrition information was posted.

Restaurants are driven by consumer demand. If people don't buy healthy menu options, restaurants won't offer them. If you're a "health conscious consumer" who wants to make the best use of this new information, here are some suggestions:

- Look for meal options containing less than 500 calories, 15 grams of fat, 5 grams of saturated fat and 650 mg of sodium.
- If no options meet the above guidelines, choose the one with the least saturated fat and calories, and the most fruit, vegetables or whole grains.
- If a menu choice is too high in fat and calories, omit the sauce, cheese, sour cream, guacamole, or mayo, or opt for low-fat substitutions like salsa, barbecue sauce, mustard, low-fat cheese or light salad dressing.
- Order a smaller portion, share with a friend, or bring half your meal home. Order a child's portion or kid's meal if possible.
- Avoid high calorie beverages and extras like chips, fries, cookies and desserts. Substitute calorie-free beverages, fruit, salad with low-fat dressing, or a yogurt parfait instead.
- Eat "mindfully" and enjoy your meal. Find a place to relax and eat slowly. Mindful eating helps you notice when you're full, facilitates digestion and makes you feel more satisfied.
- Think of each meal as part of a bigger picture. If you want to "splurge" on your favorite meal, just make healthier choices the rest of the day.

Moderation is the key to a healthy diet. Just use the nutrition information available to make wiser choices, even if they aren't always the healthiest ones on the menu. If you save yourself a couple hundred calories along the way, you'll be well on your way to better health and a trimmer waistline...