

Labelling menus

The truth shall make you thin

Restaurants across the country may have to post calorie-counts

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ON JULY 1st California began enforcing a new menu-labelling law, which requires chain restaurants (ones with more than 20 branches) to post the calories in their fare on their menus. Three other states, Oregon, Maine and Massachusetts, have already passed similar regulations, as have 11 city and county governments. The trend has gathered strength quickly, mostly because of concern about the nation's expanding waistlines. New York City was the first place to enact a menu-labelling law; it went into effect in March 2008. The next step is to deploy the practice nationally. The requirement is duly included in Senator Edward Kennedy's version of the health-reform bill now being debated in Congress.

More than a third of American adults are obese, and they often struggle to estimate the number of calories they consume when eating out. In a study published in the *American Journal of Public Health* participants underestimated the calories in unhealthy foods at a restaurant by more than 600 calories, around a third of the maximum a woman is supposed to consume in a day.

Proponents of menu labelling hope that knowing what is in their food may direct people to healthier items. Los Angeles County's Public Health Department rather bravely projects that menu labelling could prevent nearly 40% of the annual weight gain there, for example.

The effect of menu labelling on dietary choices remains unclear, and the regulations are too new to produce much evidence. To some, however, the public-health benefits of the new legislation are irrelevant. "You have labels on your clothes to tell you what's in it and where it's made," says Kelly Brownell of Yale's Rudd Centre for Food Policy and Obesity, who believes that the consumer has a right to know the calorie-count of a restaurant meal.

Menu labelling may also encourage restaurants to provide healthier dishes. In response to New York's menu-labelling law, Cusi, a restaurant chain, created a new menu with healthier items and



How many?Getty Images

lowered the calorie content of some of its existing sandwiches. As a result, it says, people are switching to the lower-cal products. National chains like Starbucks, McDonald's, Denny's and Dunkin' Donuts have all introduced less calorific items since menu labelling went into effect in New York.

Changes in consumer taste, they say, not menu labelling, are the reason for these changes. But worries about having to print supersize calorie counts on their menus may have played some part. The proof is in the reduced-fat pudding.

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