

**Statement by Margo Wootan, D.Sc.**  
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It's exciting to be here this morning to support Councilmember Mendelson's introduction of this important piece of anti-obesity legislation. His legislation addresses one key contributor to obesity and unhealthy diets, restaurant foods.

D.C. is part of a growing trend to address obesity by providing better nutrition information in chain restaurants. A half dozen states, including New York, New Hampshire, Texas, California, Maine and Pennsylvania, have introduced similar bills.

The rise in obesity rates in the District and the country as a whole is not due to a decline in Americans' willpower. Life in modern America promotes eating and discourages moving. Ads encourage us to eat too much of the wrong kinds of foods. Neighborhoods are designed for driving not walking. Restaurants serve large portion sizes and few provide easy-to-use nutrition information. Labor saving devices like dishwashers and escalators reduce our need for physical activity. And, school districts are bridging budget gaps by selling junk food to kids.

With all these pressures to eat and barriers to activity, people could use some help. While ultimately it's up to individuals to feed themselves and their families, healthy eating should not be like swimming up stream. Councilmember Mendelson's legislation is one key step toward making it easier for people to eat well and maintain a healthy weight.

Revealing the nutritional content of restaurant foods may not have had a big impact on the public's health years ago, when people ate out primarily on special occasions or as a treat. But today, Americans are relying more and more on restaurants to feed themselves and their families. Away-from-home foods now provide about a third of adults' and children's calorie intakes. Studies show that when people eat out they eat more calories, more saturated fat and fewer nutrients than when they eat at home. Children eat twice as many calories when they eat a meal at a restaurant than when they eat at home.

It's not uncommon for restaurant entrees to provide a half a day's worth of calories. Add side dishes, an appetizer *or* dessert and you can end up with a whole day's calories with just one meal. The calorie counts of restaurant foods can be beyond belief. Certainly no one would mistake an order of cheese fries from a typical steakhouse as a health food, but few would expect it to provide a day and a half's worth of calories. A slice of carrot cake from the Cheesecake Factory has 1,560 calories and 23 grams of heart-stopping saturated fat.

The nutritional quality of restaurant foods vary widely, but without nutrition information, it's difficult to compare options. Many may not realize that a tuna salad sandwich from a typical deli can have 50 percent more calories and twice as much saturated fat as a roast beef sandwich with mustard. A sirloin steak has half the calories of a porterhouse. Nutrition labeling in restaurants will open up new options for health-conscious diners, revealing that some foods that they thought were unhealthy are not so bad.

A study conducted by CSPI and New York University found that even well-trained nutrition professionals could not estimate the calorie and fat content of typical restaurant meals. They consistently *underestimated* the amounts and the underestimates were substantial -- by 200 to 600 calories. When shown a display of a typical dinner-house hamburger and onion rings, the dietitians estimated that it had 925 calories, when in fact it contained about 1,500 calories. If trained nutrition professionals can't tell what's in restaurant meals, consumers don't stand a chance.

While we have good nutrition labeling on packaged foods in supermarkets, at restaurants we can only guess what we're eating. McDonald's and Burger King congratulate themselves for providing nutrition information, but even their posters and pamphlets are hard to find and hard to read. And, they provided that information initially to avoid legal action by several state attorneys general back in the mid-1980s.

Calorie and other nutrition labeling at chain restaurants could help people to make more informed choices for a growing portion of their diet and could spur restaurants to reformulate and improve the nutritional quality of their offerings.

D.C. should be the first in the country to provide easy to use, easy to find nutrition information at chain restaurants. This information would make it easier for District residents to eat well, feed their families right, and maintain a healthy weight.

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