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Today, the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) is releasing a new report, called *Anyone's Guess*, on the impact of restaurant foods on American's diets and health. In our research to identify promising ways of reducing obesity and other diet-related diseases, helping Americans to make healthier choices at restaurants has emerged as a top priority.

When eating out, adults and children don't eat as well as at home. Children eat almost twice as many calories when they eat a meal at a restaurant compared to at home (770 calories versus 420 calories). Women who eat out more often (more than 5 times a week) eat about 300 more calories each day than women who eat out less often. Away-from-home foods provide more saturated fat, but fewer nutrients, like calcium and fiber, than foods prepared at home.

The nutritional quality of restaurant meals and foods varies, but without nutrition information it is difficult to compare options and make informed choices. A study conducted by CSPI and New York University several years ago found that even well-trained nutrition professionals can't estimate the calorie content of popular restaurant meals. They consistently *underestimated* and the underestimations were substantial – by 200 to 600 calories. For instance, when shown a display of a typical hamburger and onion rings from a dinner house restaurant like T.G.I. Friday's or Applebee's, the dietitians estimated that it had 865 calories, when it actually contained 1,550 calories. If food professionals can't estimate the calorie content when looking at a plate of food, you can be sure that the average consumer is completely at a loss.

Who could guess that a drink can pack the calories of a whole meal? A large shake at McDonald's has over a thousand calories, 35% more than are in a meal of a hamburger, small fries plus a small Coke. It's not obvious that ordering a venti Caffe Mocha with whole milk (530 calories) instead of a grande Caffe Latte with skim milk (160 calories) at Starbucks will triple the calories. While everyone knows that the vegetable of the day (60 calories) is a healthier choice than French fries (590 calories), they might be surprised to learn that the fries have ten times as many calories.



In the past, when eating out was an occasional treat, few had to worry about the nutritional quality of restaurant foods. But people are eating at restaurants twice as much as in 1970. Eating out now provides about a third of Americans' calories.

Over the last eight months, six states – California, Maine, New Hampshire, New York, Pennsylvania, and Texas – and the District of Columbia have introduced bills to require nutrition information in chain restaurants.

The Administration has been talking about restaurant foods and calling on restaurants to improve their offerings and provide better nutrition information. However, the Administration needs to do more than talk. The Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) recent announcement about setting up criteria for voluntary labeling at restaurants is more about PR than public health. The problem is not that labeling in restaurants is inconsistent; the problem is that it is virtually nonexistent. And, unfortunately, the FDA has no authority to require menu labeling in restaurants.

The current voluntary system for nutrition labeling in restaurants is inadequate. Two-thirds of the largest chain restaurants don't provide any nutrition information to their customers. The approximately one-third of chain restaurants that do provide nutrition information do so on websites, which have to be accessed before leaving home, or on hard-to-find and difficult-to-read posters or brochures in their stores. If restaurants can provide nutrition information on websites and posters, they should be able to put those numbers on the menu.

Several fast-food chains initially provided in-store nutrition brochures under the threat of legal action. In 1986, McDonald's, Burger King, Jack in the Box, KFC, and Wendy's agreed to provide in-store nutrition information to avoid further legal action by several state attorneys general.

People have become accustomed to having access to nutrition information in supermarkets and they want that information on menus. According to a new nationally representative poll commissioned by CSPI (conducted by the Global Strategy Group, September 4 to 8, 2003), two-thirds (67%) of Americans support requiring fast-food and other chain restaurants to display the calorie content of their foods on menus and menu boards. A previous poll by Harvard Forums on Health found a similar result.

Importantly, packaged-food labeling has resulted in reformulation of many existing products to improve their nutritional quality. It also has led to the introduction of new low-fat, low-sodium and other nutritionally-improved products. Nutrition labeling in restaurants likely would spur similar improvements.

CSPI applauds Congresswoman DeLauro for her leadership in addressing obesity. Many state and federal legislators are wringing their hands about the rising obesity rates or introducing do-nothing measures like declaring an obesity awareness month. Congresswoman DeLauro, instead, has defied industry lobbying to introduce a bill that will address one of the key contributors to obesity for both adults and children. We hope many of her colleagues in Congress will join her in supporting this important health legislation.

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