

Calorie Labels on Restaurant Menus: Who Uses Them and Do They Find Them Helpful?

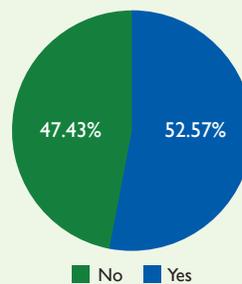
Limiting excessive caloric intake is essential to achieving a healthy weight, and because overweight and obese individuals have an elevated risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD), type II diabetes, and certain cancers, reducing excess caloric intake can help lower the incidence of chronic disease at both the individual and population level. Providing calorie information on restaurant menus to help consumers make informed choices about their meals could be an effective way to help consumers cut calories and achieve a healthier weight, as nearly one-third of an average American's total calories comes from foods prepared outside the home, and research shows that people tend to underestimate the number of calories in restaurant meals.

In 2010, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) mandated that restaurants and similar retail food establishments that are part of a chain of 20 or more locations, doing business under the same name, offering for sale substantially the same menu items, and selling restaurant-type foods disclose calorie information at the point of purchase. Although this mandate has not yet been finalized or enacted on a national level, some restaurants have started providing calorie information voluntarily, and several municipalities have implemented their own menu labeling rules. Although calorie information is becoming increasingly available, little is known about how people use this information in their daily lives. Several studies have found that calorie labels have little or no effect on food choice behavior, possibly because people lack the knowledge or skills necessary to incorporate calorie counts into their decision-making process. This HINTS *Brief* examines whether Americans use calorie information when it is available in restaurants and whether they find this information helpful in deciding what to order.

Quick Facts

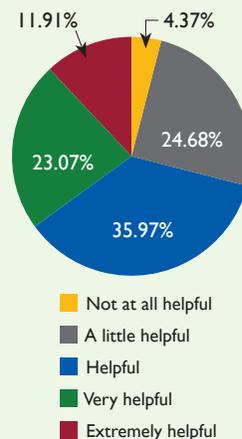
- Overweight and obese individuals are at higher risk for chronic diseases, including CVD, type II diabetes, and certain cancers.
- Americans consume about 32 percent of their calories from food prepared away from home, and this food tends to be high in calories and fat.
- Most people are unaware of the high calorie content of menu items and may underestimate calorie content by as much as 50 percent.
- Providing nutritional information at the point of sale may improve food choice by increasing people's awareness of the calorie content of restaurant meals and creating greater demand for smaller portions and healthier options.

Use of restaurant menu labeling



Fifty-three percent of Americans reported that they "always," "often," or "sometimes" use calorie information on menus when deciding what to order; 47 percent of Americans reported that they "rarely" or "never" use this information.

Helpfulness of restaurant menu labeling



Approximately 35 percent of Americans reported that they found calorie information to be "very" or "extremely" helpful in deciding what to order. An additional 36 percent reported that the calorie information was "helpful," whereas 25 percent reported that this information was only "a little" helpful, and 4 percent stated that they found calorie information on menus "not at all" helpful.

In this HINTS *Brief*, we examine how Americans use calorie information in restaurants and whether they find it helpful.

Demographic and Behavioral Predictors of Reported Use and Perceived Helpfulness of Calorie Information

In a recent study, investigators analyzed HINTS 4 Cycle 2 data (2012) to examine use and reported helpfulness of calorie information in restaurants. The study found that although just over half of Americans (53 percent) use calorie information in restaurants when available, non-Hispanic whites and those with higher levels of education are more likely to use this information than non-Hispanic blacks and those with less educational attainment. No association was found between having a diet-related chronic condition and using calorie information.

The study also found that consuming more vegetables is associated with a higher likelihood of using calorie information and that individuals who are actively attempting to lose or maintain weight, or to modify or maintain their vegetable or soda consumption, are more likely to use calorie information (but are not more likely to report finding the information helpful). This suggests that identifying ways to make labels more useful would benefit everyone, including those who are already motivated to maintain a healthy diet.

How Can This Inform Your Work?

Policy efforts to improve public understanding of health-related topics have long been a cornerstone of public health. HINTS data suggest that a majority of Americans use calorie information on menus when available and that more than 70 percent of those who use this information find it at least somewhat helpful. However, the fact that nearly 30 percent of people who use calorie labels find them only a little (or not at all) helpful highlights the importance of ensuring that menu labeling policies are implemented effectively and that the information provided meets the needs of the public.

The data also suggest that in addition to policies making calorie information available, consumers would benefit from greater contextual knowledge about diet. Although a short statement about daily caloric intake is required as part of the menu labeling rule, additional information—delivered through targeted media campaigns, educational materials distributed at clinics or community centers, discussions with health care providers, or messages about overall diet quality displayed at the point of sale—could provide consumers with the knowledge and skills needed to incorporate point of purchase nutritional information into their food choices and overall caloric intake. Reaching certain demographic groups including racial/ethnic minorities, those with lower educational attainment, and individuals with chronic diseases with this information is especially important, given the documented disparities in obesity, dietary patterns, and health literacy among these populations.

About HINTS

hints.cancer.gov

The National Cancer Institute (NCI) created the Health Information National Trends Survey (HINTS) to monitor changes in the rapidly evolving field of health communication. The survey data can be used to understand how adults use communication channels to obtain health information for themselves and their loved ones. It can also help practitioners create more effective health communication strategies.

The HINTS survey has been fielded eight times to date: HINTS 1 (2003) surveyed 6,369 Americans; HINTS 2 (2005) surveyed 5,586 Americans; HINTS 3 (2008) surveyed 7,674 Americans; HINTS 4 Cycle 1 (2011) surveyed 3,959 Americans; HINTS 4 Cycle 2 (2012) surveyed 3,630 Americans; HINTS 4 Cycle 3 (2013) surveyed 3,185 Americans; HINTS 4 Cycle 4 (2014) surveyed 3,677 Americans; and HINTS FDA (2015) surveyed 3,787 Americans.

HINTS Briefs provide a snapshot of noteworthy, data-driven research findings. They introduce population-level estimates for specific questions in the survey and summarize significant research findings resulting from analyses of how certain demographic characteristics influence specific outcomes. Many Briefs summarize research findings from recent peer-reviewed journal articles that have used HINTS data.

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