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Resolution on Nutrition Disclosure for Restaurant Foods

The Transatlantic Consumer Dialogue calls upon the governments of the United States and the European Union to require fast-food and other chain restaurants with 10 or more establishments to provide information about nutritional quality on menu boards or menus for standardized menu items.

Introduction

The United States

Americans are increasingly relying on restaurants to feed themselves and their families. Almost half of the typical American's food budget is spent on food consumed away from home and Americans consume about one-third of their calories from restaurants and other food-service establishments.^{1, 2, 3}

Foods that Americans eat from restaurants are generally higher in calories and saturated fat and lower in nutrients, such as calcium and fiber, than home-prepared foods.⁴

Studies link eating out with obesity and higher caloric intakes. American children eat almost twice as many calories when they eat a meal at a restaurant (770 calories) compared to at home (420 calories).⁵ The average American eats out almost six times a week; enough to exceed calorie requirements over the course of an entire week.⁶

Without nutrition information, it is difficult to compare options and make informed decisions. For example, a large chocolate shake at McDonalds has 400 more calories than a whole meal of a hamburger, small fries, and a small Coke. A Burger King Tendercrisp Chicken Sandwich (780 calories) has about the same number of calories as a Burger King Whopper hamburger (700 calories).⁷

Three-quarters of adults report using labels on packaged food, and using labels is associated with eating more healthful diets.^{8, 9} Studies also show that the provision of nutrition information at restaurants helps people make lower calorie choices.

Nutrition disclosure also leads to reformulation of existing products and the introduction of new nutritionally improved products. For example, trans fat labeling in the U.S. on packaged food has lead many companies to reformulate their products and use healthier fats and oils. In a similar fashion, nutrition labeling on menus and menu boards is likely to spur nutritional improvements in restaurant foods.¹⁰

The U.S. National Academies' Institute of Medicine recommends that restaurant chains "provide calorie content and other key nutrition information, as possible, on menus and packaging that is prominently visible at point of choice and use" (2006).¹¹ The Food and

Drug Administration, Surgeon General, and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services also recommend that restaurants provide nutrition information.¹²

However, half of the largest chain restaurants in the U.S. do not provide any nutrition information about their foods.¹³ Those that do provide information usually do so in hard to use formats. Brochures and posters are often hard to find and provide nutrition data tables that are hard to read. Nutrition information on company websites requires people to access computers. Information on tray liners or fast-food packages is not accessible to customers until after they order.

Recently, two American cities/counties, New York and King County (Seattle, Washington), passed laws requiring calorie disclosure on menu boards. Some chain restaurants, such as Subway, have already begun to comply with the New York City menu labeling law, demonstrating that such requirements are practical for the industry to follow and practical for regulatory authorities to implement.

The European Union

Europeans are increasingly shifting their diets towards greater fast food consumption and larger portion sizes. McDonald's is now the largest food service provider in Europe with sales of €12.7 Billion in 2006;¹⁴ sales growth for McDonald's in Europe (11.2% in 2007), has been more than enough to offset declining sales in the US.

Out-of-home eating grew from 24.4% of eating occasions to 27% throughout Europe between the years 2002 and 2007. In some European countries, rates are even higher; in the United Kingdom, 35.5% of eating occasions were out-of-home in 2007.¹⁵ Britons spend an average of 25 minutes eating in cafes and restaurants every day for a cost of £11.41 each week.¹⁶

A leading study of European eating habits away from home, "Eating out of home and its correlates in 10 European countries...", considered survey data from 36,894 individuals, and found that out-of-home eating "is associated with increased energy intake" and corresponds with the increasing prevalence of obesity in Europe.¹⁷ When eating out, Europeans tend to consume more sweets (23.7% of all out-of-home calories), cereals (16.8%), and dairies (11.2%), and fewer fruits (7.3%) and vegetables (1.6%)¹⁸ than when eating at home. Little difference in nutritional quality between fast food items in the US and Europe also suggest that these statistics correlate with higher caloric intake and a corresponding rise in obesity rates.

Thus, the case for nutrition disclosure for standardized restaurant foods can and should be made for the European Union as well as for the U.S. As in the U.S., nutrition disclosure would assist Europeans in making healthier eating choices, spur product reformulations, and help reduce the incidence of obesity and diet-related disease.

Legislative and Regulatory options

Requirements for nutrition disclosures may vary from nation to nation, due to nutritional health priorities, cultural traditions, results of consumer research studies, and consumer expectations. In general, such requirements should be based on the following principles:

- Nutrition disclosures requirements for chain restaurants with 10 or more outlets should be mandatory for each standardized menu item.
- Nutrition disclosures should be made at the point of purchase, in a uniform location on menu boards or menus next to the name and price of each standard menu option, and should be easy to comprehend by consumers, including children.
- Current practices by some companies of disclosing nutrient levels and GDA's for particular items on the Internet, in brochures, and/or on posters, or trayliners are

difficult to comprehend, confusing, and do not sufficiently inform consumers at the point of sale.

- National authorities should determine the most useful form of nutrition disclosure. This may include use of universal symbols indicating calorie content and/or saturated fat, sodium and sugar levels. Simple signposting should clearly indicate healthier and less healthy options consistent with national dietary guidelines based on public health priorities.

Endnotes

¹ US Department of Labor. Bureau of Labor. « Consumer Expenditures in 2005 » Accessed at <<http://www.bls.gov/cex/csxann05.pdf>> on March 3, 2008.

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⁴ Lin, et al. *Ibid*.

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⁸ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (US DHHS). The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Office of the Surgeon General, 2001. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (US DHHS), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Healthy People 2000 Final Review. Hyattsville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, 2001b. DHHS Publication No. 01-0256.

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¹⁰ Silverglade, Bruce. « Food Labeling: Rules You Can Live By. » *Legal Times*, July 17, 1995, pp. 21-24.

¹¹ Committee on Food Marketing and the Diets of Children and Youth, J. Michael McGinnis, Jennifer Appleton Gootman, Vivica I. Kraak, Editors. *Food Marketing to Children and Youth: Threat or Opportunity?* Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2006, p. 382.

¹² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (US DHHS). *The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity*. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Office of the Surgeon General, 2001.

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¹⁴ Horizons (Market Research), 2006.

¹⁵ Datamonitor Report. Quoted in « Habit of a lifetime. » *Bakery and snacks.com*. July 21, 2003. Accessed at < <http://www.bakeryandsnacks.com/news/ng.asp?id=13909-habit-of-a> > on March 3, 2008.

¹⁶ « Britons spending ever more time and money on out-of-home dining. » *The Leisure Report*. February 2008.

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¹⁸ P Ofanos *et al.* *Ibid.*