

Calorie Counts on Menus: Do They Work?

Do your clients eat out often? Are they looking for help in choosing lower-calorie meals? In a new study, Cornell researchers conducted a randomized experiment to see whether [calorie counts](#) on menus are affecting what customers order in full-service restaurants.

They found that diners whose menus listed calories ordered meals with 3% fewer calories—about 45 calories less—than those who had menus without calorie information. Customers ordered fewer calories in their appetizer and entrée courses, but their dessert and drink orders remained the same.

“Even if you’re an educated person who eats out a lot and is aware of [nutrition](#), there can still be surprising things in these calorie counts,” said co-author John Cawley, professor of policy analysis and management in the College of Human Ecology.

Even the chefs at the restaurants in the study were startled by the high number of calories in some dishes, such as a tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwich combo. “They would have said it was one of the lower-calorie items on the menu,” said co-author Alex Susskind, associate professor of operations, technology and information management at the School of Hotel Administration.

The 3% reduction in calories implies an average reduction in weight of roughly 1 pound over 3 years, the researchers estimated. That is on average, with greater reductions among more frequent diners at restaurants, and less for those who eat out less.

The findings come at a time when most Americans don’t have a precise estimate of how many calories they’re eating, because one-third of their food is prepared outside the home. At the same time, the [obesity](#) crisis in America has reached epidemic proportions; the prevalence of obesity in adults has nearly tripled in the past 50 years, affecting almost 40% of the population in 2016.

In response, many cities, counties and states have passed laws requiring restaurants to include calorie information on their menus. And as of May, it's been a nationwide requirement that chain restaurants with 20 or more units post calories on menus and menu boards, as part of the [Affordable Care Act of 2010](#).

Until now, not much has been known about how this law is affecting consumer [behavior](#). To find out, the Cornell researchers conducted a randomized field experiment in two full-service restaurants. There was a wide range of calorie counts across the menus. In one restaurant, the number of calories in the appetizers ranged from 200 to 910. Entrées ranged from 580 to 1,840 calories, and desserts from 420 to 1,150 calories.

Each party of diners was randomly assigned to either a control group, which received the usual menus, or a treatment group, which got the same menus but with calorie counts next to each item. At the end of the meal, each diner was asked to complete a survey that collected sociodemographic information and attitudes toward diet and exercise. In all, the researchers gathered data from 5,550 diners.

The study also found that diners valued the calorie information. Majorities of both the treatment and control groups supported having calorie labels on menus.

And there was no downside for restaurants. Their revenue, profit and labor costs were unchanged. "It's a cheap policy to put in place, and the fact that there is a reduction in calories ordered makes it appealing," Cawley said.

The study, "The Impact of Information Disclosure on Consumer Behavior," was released in August by the National Bureau of Economic Research and co-written with Cawley's former doctoral advisee Barton Willage, PhD, who is now an assistant professor of economics at Louisiana State University. [IDEA Fit Tips, Volume 16, Issue 10](#)

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