

Myth vs. Reality:

Nutrition Labeling at Chain Restaurants

The *Restaurant Association of Maryland* and our state's 9,500 restaurant and foodservice locations have long been committed to promoting active and healthy lifestyles.

Our industry has taken substantive steps to expand menu offerings to include a broader selection of healthier foods. Restaurants have responded to growing demands from consumers by designing menus that highlight nutrition, fresh ingredients, smaller portions and an interesting fusion of flavors that rely on considerably less fat and sodium (salt). We have responded to our customers and will continue to do so as they demand healthier options.

MYTH: The proposed legislation would apply only to restaurants with 15 or more outlets. Small business owners wouldn't be affected by the legislation.

REALITY: Many chain restaurant locations are franchised, which means they are independently-owned small businesses. Their owners incur the costs of updating menus and menu boards, not the corporate offices. In the quick-service segment, 50% of restaurants are franchised. Industry-wide, 29% of restaurants are franchised. And 10% of full-service restaurants are franchised.

MYTH: If restaurants provide nutrition information on Web sites and in brochures, they should be able to do so on menus and menu boards.

REALITY: Restaurant chains provide comprehensive, easy-to-read nutrition information in brochures, tray liners, posters and Web sites. The detailed information includes calories, saturated fat, trans fat, total fat, carbohydrate, protein, sodium and other nutrients. Many include educational messages to help customers make healthful choices, such as, "Choose skim over whole milk" or "Hold the mayonnaise to save 100 calories."

MYTH: Nutrition information on menus or menu boards is more convenient for customers. It helps them make healthful decisions at point of sale.

REALITY: Posters, brochures or kiosks in the restaurant are equally convenient. Customers can consult a brochure, poster or kiosk screen just before ordering just as easily — if not more so — than a lengthy menu board or menu. Speed of service is very important, especially in quick-service restaurants. One person trying to decipher fat, calorie and sodium counts for multiple items on a menu board would slow the ordering line and significantly affect service for all other customers. Providing a median value or range for similar products on a menu isn't helpful either. It actually is a disservice to restaurant guests. For example, coffee chains typically offer a broad variety of options for coffee, cappuccino or lattes, including skim milk, 2%, whole or soy milk. The calories in a latte, depending on the type of milk added, vary from 160 to 260. That 100-calorie difference is significant to people watching their caloric intake. Research shows that many people can avoid weight gain by reducing their diets by 100 calories a day, depending on their physical-activity level.



Did You Know?

76% of meals are prepared at home.

More than three out of four adults (78%) agree that there are menu items available at table-service restaurants for those who are watching calories or fat consumption, and more than half (56%) say restaurants make it easy for diners to choose a portion size they want.

The restaurant industry is actively engaged in innovative programs to help prevent obesity, including contributing millions of dollars to nutrition education and physical education programs, both in local communities and on a national level.

MYTH: Even when people customize their orders, nutrition information for standard menu items at chain restaurants provides a good comparison base to help customers make informed choices.

REALITY: Restaurants designed around the concept of customer customization may not be able to provide accurate or easy-to-understand information to comply with menu-labeling mandates. Examples of such foods include sandwiches, pizza, burritos, tacos and salads. According to the *National Restaurant Association*, a sandwich made from just five items (bread, meat, cheese, lettuce, tomato) can be ordered 120 different ways. A 10-item sandwich could be combined 3.6 million ways. Make that 15 items, and a sandwich has billions of possible combinations. As a result, providing nutrition labeling for customized foods would be confusing for some consumers and inaccurate for others. A well-meaning idea shouldn't have the unintended consequence of further confusing consumers.

MYTH: A restaurant chain would incur a one-time cost to have all menu items tested. Many already have such information.

REALITY: This is NOT a one-time cost. When restaurants analyze their menu items, they continuously update their databases. Most restaurants submit menu items to laboratories more than once a year to ensure accuracy. And when a menu item or product supplier changes — even marginally — the nutrition information changes.

MYTH: Nutrition information on restaurant menus will encourage people to eat healthier.

REALITY: Nutrition labels have been mandated on grocery products since 1994, yet nationwide obesity rates have risen dramatically since that time. Effectively addressing the obesity issue will require personal responsibility, education, increased physical activity, moderation and balance.



Food For Thought

Nine in 10 consumers do not know how many calories they need daily; one in two refuse to even guess. (*International Food Information Council research*)

Maryland's restaurant industry employs **174,000 employees**, who are preparing, cooking and serving food. Unlike packaged foods, restaurant fare includes a human element in creating and refining dishes. While nutrition information has been available on all packaged foods since the mid 1990s, it has failed to impact the overall health of consumers because **it provides no education on the basics of nutrition** and how to make responsible decisions for personal health management.

Only 1 state, Illinois, requires physical education classes as part of the curriculum.

People, particularly young people, are leading more and more sedentary lifestyles. When was the last time you actually saw children playing ball in the street? Today, their favorite activities involve sitting with computers, video games, iPods or cell phones. For example, the average U.S. child spends 15,000 to 18,000 hours watching TV by age 17. This represents 38% more time spent sitting in front of TV than in school (12,000 hours). (*Study by researchers at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, along with experts at the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH), published in the Journal of the American Medical Association*)



Unless otherwise cited, data from National Restaurant Association