

Needs Assessment Summary
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Menu nutrition labeling has been an up and coming change to the average American fast food, fast casual chain restaurant. On average, Americans eat about $\frac{1}{3}$ of their calories outside of the home, so making nutrition information available to people on restaurant menus is a good way to help them make informed choices decisions about what they order. FDA's final rule for chain restaurants and similar retail food establishments is to provide customers with clear and consistent nutrition information that is easily accessible. They are required to post calories on menus and provide other nutritional information in writing, to help consumers make informed and healthful dietary choices. The nutritional information in writing must include total calories, calories from fat, total fat, saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, sodium, total carbohydrates, fiber, sugars, and protein. To be considered one of these establishments, it must be part of a chain of 20 or more locations, doing business under the same name, and offering the same menu items for sale. The final rule has been a published requirement since December 1st, 2014.¹

The goal of this new menu nutrition labeling system is to help contribute to the prevention and control of obesity, heart disease, diabetes, and cancer by helping consumers make informed choices about food that are more appropriate for their diet. This is an important move because of the increasing time and money that is spent eating out at restaurants. Research shows that consumers often underestimate the calories and fat that are found in foods outside of the home. Menu labeling can potentially have a great impact on the consumer's purchasing decisions and get people in the habit of making healthier choices. This new rule has also caused some food establishments to offer more healthful options and reinvent their current options. It is important to gather information on different demographics of people to determine how much this will make a difference in their lives and how they might embrace the new menu nutrition labeling. The purpose of this survey was to assess the importance and necessity menu nutrition labeling would have on mothers with young children ages 2-6 years old when making decisions for their children.²

The developed survey was completed by nine mothers. A copy of the survey has been included and contained questions in relation to one's awareness of the nutritional content of foods and purchasing habits while dining out. On average, the mother's had 1.8 children with a mean age of 3.4 years. The mothers were mostly caucasian, in their late twenties to early thirties, and were all middle to upper class. All but one were married, and about half of the mothers were stay at home moms. The other half worked full time, with one mother working part-time from home.

The moms responded dining out occurs one to three times a week with twice a week being the most popular response. The most popular type of restaurant frequented was fast food, with Chick-fil-a being specifically mentioned over any other establishment. Other than fast food, the mothers stated eating out at fast casual and family friendly sit down restaurants. Seven out of the nine mothers allow their children to make their own selections when eating out. Several of the mothers said they provide guidance to the children by narrowing the choices or vetoing certain food items. The most popular food items the kids ate were chicken, either grilled or nuggets, with a side of fruit or vegetables. Other "kid foods" were mentioned as well, such as pizza, pasta, and french fries. Over half the mothers stated they were happy with the food options at restaurants, and felt restaurants were starting to offer healthier options. The mothers who were not satisfied said they wanted to see more grilled meats, vegetables, and seafood items on children's menus.

Every mother except one stated they had noticed nutritional information posted on a menu or menu board when eating out. However, only half said that posted nutritional information would influence them to pick a healthier option. The other half said it would not influence what they order for their children, mostly because eating out was already considered a special occasion. If anything, they thought posted nutritional information would have more of an influence on what they choose for themselves than their children. All but one said they would pay more for a healthier food item, and all the mothers stated nutritional content of products in a grocery store influence their decisions on what to buy for themselves and their children.

The results of this survey demonstrated the important role nutrition labeling is playing in the daily lives of families and how menu labeling caters to people who are already health conscious. For this specific population, a majority of the moms seemed to already be aware of the nutrition in the food they purchase for their children. Some of the mothers said they would like to see nutrition info other than just calories posted on menus. When going out to eat at a restaurant, families pay attention to what they are ordering and try to keep to a balanced meal. In order for food labeling to be successful, more restaurants than the chain establishments need to offer this on their menus. Also, possible laws and regulations should be implemented where all restaurants are required to have nutrition labeling on their kid's menus. If this became a requirement, perhaps more families would be aware of the amount of calories and nutrients their children are taking in at a meal. Developing a labeling system that incorporates other nutrients may prove to be more effective in identifying healthy food options and deterring people from food items with less nutritional value.

Nutrition labeling should also be easy to read for children. If taught at an early age how to identify what's good and bad to eat, children might become more educated on healthy eating patterns. For example, using a color labeling system to make healthy food easy to identify. The child could associate healthy vegetables with the color green and make it easy to choose. Some mother's in the survey said that they allow their children to decide what they want to order from a menu. If the child learns that something is good for him, it might influence his decision.

In conclusion, the menu nutrition labeling has brought about positive changes. It seems mothers in particular, are most keen as to what their child is eating so having the information readily available for them has been found beneficial based on the survey. Also restaurants are feeling the pressures of healthy lifestyle changes and starting to offer healthier menu items and replacements more than before. It will take some time before we can see if FDA's final rule will play a part in the prevention and control of nutrition-related diseases, but it looks like it is a step in the right direction.

References

1. Nutrition C for FS and A. Labeling & Nutrition - Overview of FDA Labeling Requirements for Restaurants, Similar Retail Food Establishments and Vending Machines. <http://www.fda.gov/Food/IngredientsPackagingLabeling/LabelingNutrition/ucm248732.htm>. Accessed March 3, 2015.
2. Trust for America's Health. Menu Labeling. *State Obes*. <http://stateofobesity.org/menu-labeling/>.

