



Position Statement on Nutrition Labelling on Restaurant Menus

ACDPA supports the provision of nutrition labelling on menus at fast food and snack food chain outlets as an important element of a comprehensive obesity prevention strategy.

Nutrition labelling on menus is important to provide consumers with the information they need to make healthier choices when eating out and may also encourage food service outlets to improve the nutritional profile of the foods and beverages they offer.

As evidence relating to the impact of nutrition labelling on menus is still developing, a 'learning by doing' approach should be adopted to improve understanding of what works in this area, so that implementation of the initiative is not delayed.

ACDPA calls on state, territory and federal governments to legislate and enforce a nationally uniform, mandatory nutrition labelling system on restaurant menus which:

- Applies to cafés (café/coffee chain stores and bakery chains) quick service restaurants (fast food chains) and snack food chain stores, including ice-cream stores and juice bars, with 20 or more outlets nationally and standard menu items.
- Prominently displays nutrition information next to menu items at the point of purchase in a format that ensures consumers have the best chance of seeing and easily understanding the information.
- Discloses as a minimum the energy (kilojoule) content per serve of standard menu items. Ideally the saturated fat and salt content per serve should also be provided.
- Includes a reference to recommended daily intake of energy and if provided, other nutrients such as saturated fat and salt.
- Includes an interpretive element which allows all consumers, including those in lower socio-economic groups, to easily understand the dietary value of the menu item at a glance. This interpretive element should be based on the food's overall nutrient profile and should align with any interpretive element adopted for front-of-pack labelling for packaged foods, for consistency and ease of understanding. Further independent research may be required to identify the most effective interpretive element to assist consumers, including those in lower socio-economic groups, to make healthier choices in fast food and snack food chain outlets.
- Provides, additionally, a full nutrition information panel for all standard food items on packaging (if used) and on onsite brochures or posters that consumers can easily find and read prior to purchase.

In addition, ACDPA calls on state, territory and federal governments to:

- Fund and run a consumer education campaign to help all Australians, including those in lower socio-economic groups, understand menu labelling and how to use it to choose healthier foods/beverages
- Monitor and evaluate the menu labelling initiative for effectiveness and potential improvements
- Fund and/or support further independent research into nutrition labelling on menus to:
 - determine the best format for providing nutrition information, including the most effective interpretive element
 - assess the impact on consumer food choices both overall and across different population groups and
 - Explore and develop evidence-based consumer messages for use in education campaigns.

Background

The obesity epidemic is one of the most important public health challenges facing Australia today. Over the last 20 years the prevalence of obesity and overweight has increased dramatically with nearly two in three Australian adults (1) and one in four Australian children (2) now overweight or obese.

As a major cause of chronic diseases, including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, kidney disease and some cancers, excess weight imposes massive health, economic and social costs on Australia. In 2008, obesity alone was estimated to cost Australia \$58bn.(3) Based on past trends, and without effective interventions in place, 6.9 million Australians are likely to be obese by 2025.(3)

Tackling Australia's obesity epidemic is an urgent priority which requires a comprehensive range of measures to address the many factors that contribute to rising obesity rates. As frequent fast food consumption is linked with weight gain, providing nutrition labelling on menus in chain food service restaurants has been proposed as one element of a comprehensive approach to address obesity.(4)

The link between fast food and weight gain

Frequent fast food consumption (twice a week or more) is strongly associated with weight gain over time. (5-9) One study showed that people who ate fast food more than twice a week gained an average 4.5kg more weight over a 15 year follow up than those who ate fast food less than once a week.(7)

Foods eaten away from home are generally more energy dense and portion sizes are relatively larger than for foods prepared at home.(10-15) Most consumers considerably underestimate the energy (kilojoule), fat and salt content of unhealthy foods (16)while larger portion sizes of restaurant meals have been found to increase the kilojoules that people consume at a meal.(17) Both adults and children consume more kilojoules when they eat at fast-food restaurants than when they do not.(18)

Potential benefits of menu labelling

Foods eaten away from home are an important contributor to Australian diets. In 2009, 3.7 billion meals were served by commercial food outlets, of which 1.6 billion were from fast food outlets.(19) The average Australian spends 42c in every food dollar on food prepared outside home. (20) Providing nutrition information for food sold in restaurants and take-away venues provides a means of ensuring that nutrition information is available in the settings where large numbers of people eat regularly.

Although some fast food chains in Australia provide nutrition information on posters, pamphlets or websites, this information is not always easily available or accessible to consumers at the time when they are making their purchase decisions. (21;22) Evidence suggests that consumers are more likely to notice and prefer nutrition information provided on a menu or menu board rather than on websites or pamphlets. (23;24) They also think that labelling would help them to change their buying habits and control their energy intake. (24)

Evidence relating to the impact of nutrition labelling on menus is still developing and mostly derived from studies in the US. A number of studies report an average energy reduction of up to 250 calories in food purchases when menu labelling is provided.(11;25-28) In particular, menu labelling seems to have the greatest benefits for women and parents choosing foods for their children. (11;26-28) However, some studies show no impact or different impacts by gender.(29;30)

There is some evidence that nutrition labelling may encourage food services to improve the nutritional profile of their foods or meal combinations.(24;31;32) This has the potential to yield substantial health benefits, even without behavioural change by consumers.

Further research is needed to assess the impact of menu labelling on consumer consumption behaviour and on the nutritional quality of foods offered through fast food service outlets.

Consumer attitudes

Most consumers support the provision of nutrition labelling on menus. A recent Australian study found that more than 80% of consumers surveyed supported the provision of nutritional information on menu boards at food and drink chain outlets, with 62% strongly in favour. (33) In addition submissions from consumers and consumer groups to the recent review of food labelling law and policy in Australia generally supported the provision of nutrition and ingredient information by food outlets at the point of sale.(34)

There is some evidence that consumers prefer the provision of more nutrition information on menus in addition to kilojoules, including macronutrients, fat and fibre. (35) Another study suggests consumers also value having an icon to identify healthier menu items.(36)

Implementation of menu labelling

Legislation requiring calorie labelling on menus in chain restaurants consisting of 20 or more outlets nationally was passed in the US in 2010.(37) In the UK, a voluntary trial was launched in 2009 with participating restaurants listing energy (kilojoule) counts next to products on shelves, on menus or at cash registers. (38)

In Australia, menu labelling was recommended by Australia's National Preventative Health Taskforce as part of a comprehensive obesity strategy (4) and in the recent review of Australian food labelling law and policy.(34)

NSW has passed legislation requiring menu labelling across fast food and snack food chains and South Australia and Victoria have also announced their intention to introduce mandatory menu labelling by 2012. However, the number of outlets held by a chain which would trigger the menu labelling requirement varies.

The Australian and New Zealand Foods Regulation Ministerial Council has agreed to develop advice on a national approach to guide the display of nutrition information at the point of sale in standard fast food chain restaurants by mid 2011.

Number of outlets

The number of outlets held by a fast food or snack food chain which would trigger the menu labelling requirement should be set at a level which maximises the potential public health benefits of the initiative by capturing those chains that together account for the bulk of market share. However in order to avoid placing an excessive burden of regulation on small to medium sized food businesses, small chains and those without standardised menus should be excluded. Research by the National Heart Foundation indicates that chains with 20 outlets nationally would be an appropriate starting point for the menu labelling initiative.(39) This is also in line with the US legislation which applies to chain restaurants consisting of 20 or more outlets nationally. (37)

Acknowledgement

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