Background

Americans are eating out at restaurants more than in the past. In 2006, Americans spent 48% of their food dollars on foods made outside the home compared to 26% in 1970.\(^1\) Studies show that increased consumption of foods outside the home leads to obesity and health concerns.\(^2,3\) Numerous jurisdictions around the country have implemented laws requiring that calorie and other nutrition information be displayed on menus in chain restaurants. The results of studies show that customers use this information and order lower calorie meals.\(^4,5\) There is also some early indication that these laws influence the types of food offered by restaurant chains as consumers demand healthier options.\(^6\)

Menu Labeling Legislation

The Montgomery County Council passed Resolution 16-1194 requiring that eating and drinking establishments post the number of calories for any standardized menu item on each menu or menu board adjacent to the name of that item by July 1, 2010. The required nutrition information must be clear and conspicuous so as to be clearly associated with the menu item. Additional nutrition information (calories from fat, total fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, sodium, total carbohydrates, sugars, fiber, and protein) must also be made available in writing on request on the premises. This legislation applies to establishments that are part of a chain with at least 20 locations nationwide. Compliance was expected by January 1, 2011 and is regulated by the county’s Licensing and Regulatory Services.

Nationally, in March 2010, Congress passed a law requiring chain restaurants with 20 or more locations to list calories and other nutrition information on menus and menu boards. This new legislation, to be implemented in 2013, means that restaurants in Montgomery County are ahead of the trend. Questions remain, however, about the unique needs of customers in Montgomery County and how nutrition information can be used in an optimal way to curb the growing obesity problem.

Methodology

In order to assess the impact of legislation requiring that nutrition information be supplied by restaurants on customer choices of meals, the University of Maryland Extension’s Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program surveyed selected restaurants in various communities around the county. The restaurants selected for the survey were: Five Guys, IHOP, McDonald’s, Panera, Popeyes, Starbucks, Subway, and Taco Bell/KFC. Only free-standing restaurants were included; restaurants located inside stores, malls or other retail establishments were not selected. Permission was given by managers or owners of each establishment prior to administration of the surveys. Communities selected for the survey were as follows: Bethesda, Burtonsville, Gaithersburg, Germantown, Potomac, Rockville, Takoma Park, Wheaton, White Oak/Silver Spring. Research questions related to overall customer behavior; and the impact of the presentation of nutrition information, customer demographics and the environment or setting. Surveys were conducted during busy lunchtime hours primarily on the weekends. A
A convenience sampling method was used in which customers were approached at random in the restaurant dining areas and asked to complete a brief interview. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish. The interviewers were trained undergraduate students from the University of Maryland in College Park.

A total of 129 customers were interviewed with 66 (51%) male and 63 (49%) female. Ages ranged from 18 – 79. Most customers interviewed spoke English at home (67%) while nearly 19% spoke Spanish. Thirteen different languages were spoken at home by the 129 customers surveyed. The customers interviewed were well-educated with 63% having a college degree and another 18% having some college education. Only 6% (8 customers) had less than a high school diploma or GED.

A total of 23 restaurants participated in the survey. All restaurants were found to be in compliance with the law by providing calorie information on the menus so that the calorie counts were clearly associated with each menu item. When additional nutrition information was requested, there was some variation in the amount of information provided across the various chains but there was consistency within the chains. In two cases, the interviewers were forced to request additional information. In most establishments, however, additional nutrition information was readily available on the packaging for each menu item, as separate fliers or brochures, and on napkins or posters.

Findings

Overall, 32% of customers read the nutrition information and nearly all of them reported that this information influenced their meal choices. (Of the 41 customers who stated that they had read the nutrition information, 39 stated that this information influenced what they ordered.) Of those who used the nutrition information to select their meal, 67% stated they used calorie information only. Others stated they used fat content and sodium content to make their selections. Reasons for not using the nutrition information varied with 59% stating they already knew what they wanted to order. Another 19% said that the nutrition information was not important in their decision and 3 customers stated they wanted to indulge so they ignored the information. One customer was using a coupon and ordered what was on the coupon. A fairly large group (17%) said they did not use the nutrition information because they did not see it at the time they ordered their food.

Women were more likely to read the nutrition information (41% of women compared to 23% of men). Customers aged 25-39 were most likely to report reading the nutrition information to decide what to order with 64% in this age group reading the information. Of the 19 customers aged 18 – 24, none stated that they had read the nutrition information before deciding what to order. Customers with a college degree reported using nutrition information more often (36%) compared to those with some college, high school diploma or GED or less who used the nutrition information at approximately the same rate of 23%. Language spoken at home seemed to influence the use of nutrition information only slightly with 33% of English speakers reporting using the information, 28% of Spanish speakers and 29% of those who spoke other languages.

A surprising finding was that greater use of the nutrition information was reported by those who frequent the restaurant daily (50%) than by those who frequent the restaurant weekly (26%), monthly
(23%), or less (47%). Only 38% of customers who stated it was their first visit to the restaurant reported using the nutrition information.

The use of nutrition information was compared to the persons with whom the customer was eating. The percentage of customers who used the information ranged from 29-32% for customers who were dining alone or with other adults. Customers dining with children reported using the information more than the others. For them, 42% reported using the nutrition information and several stated that nutrition information for children was important to them.

Of the restaurants surveyed, there was some variation among customers in the use of nutrition information. Customers at IHOP reported using the nutrition information to order their food more than customers in other restaurants (44%). Customers at Subway and Panera reported using the information at 37-38% and customers at Starbucks and McDonald’s used the information at 32-33%. Less than 26% of customers at Taco Bell/KFC, Five Guys and Popeyes used the nutrition information to choose their meals.

Open-ended questions allowed customers to state what nutrition information interested them and how they would like to see the information presented. Many customers mentioned health concerns that made them have a specific dietary interest. Interests included breakdown of fats by saturated and transfats and others (15%), calorie information (13%), sodium (13%), sugar (9%), and ingredients (4%). Six customers (5%) mentioned they would like to see a ranking in simple terms using an approved method to make it easier to make healthy choices. Other interests mentioned by 3 or less customers were protein content and vegetarian information, cholesterol, whole grain information, vitamin content and how “natural” the food is.

Customers made numerous comments regarding ways to present the nutrition information. Five percent of customers use the internet to find nutrition information about restaurants, but most customers wanted hands-on information in the restaurant, including posters; booklets/flipbooks; brochures/pamphlets/handouts; information on packages; information on napkins; and more information on the menu. The importance of having nutrition information at close proximity to the product was mentioned by 8 customers (6%).

Two customers commented that they read nutrition information in the grocery store but not on the restaurant menus. Customers mentioned wanting information to be more visual, with more use of color, using a bigger and “better” font, and more interactive. One customer suggested “light-up boards to get attention.” Of the 15 customers who stated they did not use the nutrition information because they did not see it, age did not seem to be a factor as the majority (60%) were younger than 40 and all but one were under 50. Education also did not seem to be a factor as the majority (60%) had a college degree and all but one had at least a high school diploma or GED. Although language spoken at home was not a factor in the use of nutrition information, several customers mentioned cultural influences on the use of nutrition information that could both positively and negatively affect healthy food choices.
Findings and Policy Implications

Nearly one-third of customers surveyed used the nutrition information provided when they ordered their food. Findings indicate that age and education level might be factors related to use of nutrition information but are likely less important than other factors, such as specific health concerns or nutrition for children. Women and customers eating with children were more likely to have used the nutrition information. Younger customers under age 25 were much less likely to read the nutrition information prior to ordering.

This county-wide survey, combined with studies completed in other communities, demonstrates a growing interest in restaurant menu labeling as a way to make healthier choices. With Americans eating more meals outside the home, it seems important to find ways to make this information more useful and to encourage customers to compare menu options. The variety of responses as to how information should be displayed to be more useful shows the need for educators, marketing experts and consumer advocates to continue to research better ways to present nutrition information in the fast-paced settings of the chain restaurants. In addition, the cultural diversity of Montgomery County requires an emphasis on the cultural context to ensure that nutrition information meets the needs of the many residents of the county. The variation in the use of nutrition information in different restaurants could indicate differences in income levels, environment or other factors and should be explored further. Focus group and other qualitative methods might provide a rich array of options that could help restaurants address the nutrition information needs of various target groups.

In terms of policy recommendations, the Center for Science in the Public Interest recommends implementing nutrition labeling in state and county buildings and parks (including cafeterias and concession areas) as a logical next step. Hospitals and large employers in the county can also be requested to implement menu labeling in their cafeterias. Montgomery County is home to many eating and drinking establishments that are not part of large chains and would likely need assistance if they were required to comply with the menu labeling law. Regarding consumers, any additional research into ways to better communicate nutrition information to various audiences would improve the effectiveness of the current legislation. Consumer education to help customers demand healthy menu choices is also important. In order to regulate individual restaurants that are not part of national chains and to improve consumer education, Montgomery County might need to invest additional resources, possibly with the support of the business community or consumer advocacy groups.

Acknowledgements

This study was completed by the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) of the University of Maryland, Department of Food and Nutrition Science. We acknowledge the contribution of the following individuals: Mira Mehta, PhD for developing the survey instrument and methodology; Linda Ashburn, MPH, RN for developing the survey instruments and methodology, and coordinating with restaurants, reviewing the data and developing the report, Kavitha Sankavaram, PhD, for preparing the application and corresponding with the Institutional Review Board; and Krizia Fernandez and David McHale, undergraduate students in Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Maryland in
College Park, for conducting the interviews. We would also like to acknowledge the input and support of Carol Garvey, MD, MPH, Co-Chair of the Obesity Work Group.

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vi Bruemmer B, et al. Energy, saturated fat and sodium were lower in entrees at chain restaurants at 18 months compared with 6 months following the implementation of mandatory menu labeling regulation in King County, Washington. *Journal of American Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*. June 2012, vol. 112, p. 1169-176.

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