MENU LABELING

What is MENU LABELING?

Menu labeling is listing nutritional information on menus and menu boards. A health education tool, menu labeling helps consumers achieve healthier diets and better overall health.

What dietary information does menu labeling convey?

Menu labeling typically reports calories, saturated fat, sodium and carbohydrates.

Why is menu labeling important?

When eating at restaurants, Americans underestimate the calories in menu items. This practice causes overweight and obesity, which can lead to heart disease, cancers, diabetes and stroke. Between 1978 and 1995, Americans' away-from-home calorie intake increased from 18% to 34%, and their fat intake jumped from 19% to 38%, according to Nemours Health & Prevention Services. Informed consumers can choose low-calorie menu items for themselves and their children.

Menu labeling is especially critical to children's health. The number of obese children nationwide has tripled over the past few decades. The U.S. Centers for Disease Prevention and Control reports that about one third of children and adolescents are overweight or obese. In Delaware, approximately 36% of all children are either overweight or risk becoming so, says Nemours.

Persons following prescribed diets and/or with high blood pressure or diabetes must know food contents to prevent immediate health problems.

How does eating out increase obesity more than eating in?

Eating outside the home increases obesity by:

- Restaurants tempt consumers with mouth-watering menu photos and television advertisements, causing them to choose foods that look healthy (but are not).

- Restaurant foods can be grossly high in calories, selling 1,000-calorie entrees. Most adults need 2,000 calories daily. Huge portions cause overeating.

- Chain restaurant menus rarely contain whole grain items, which have high fiber content and help stomachs stay full. White processed flour items flow through the digestive system faster than whole grain items, causing premature hunger.

- It costs less to purchase unhealthy foods such as burgers and fries than salads and fruit.

What are the health consequences of obesity?

- Obesity can lead to diabetes, cancers, high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke. Obese persons are at risk of high cholesterol, asthma, fatty liver disease and sleep apnea. They are also at risk for depression, anxiety and unhappiness.

- Carrying excessive pounds causes mobility problems because it hurts the knees and legs.

- Medical expenditures for treating overweight and obesity, and their related preventable conditions, cost Delaware's economy.

What states and cities use menu labeling?

California, New York City and Philadelphia have mandatory menu labeling policies. Philadelphia's City Council passed the nation's strongest menu labeling law that requires chain restaurants with more than 15 restaurants to disclose calories on menu boards, and calories, saturated and trans fat, sodium and carbohydrates on printed menus. In 2006, New York City became the first U.S. city to ban restaurants from using artificial trans fats, and required eateries to post calorie counts on menus.

King County, Washington requires that chain restaurants with more than 15 national locations and $1 million in annual sales display calorie, saturated fat, trans fat, sodium, and carbohydrate information. Menu boards must post calories; more detailed nutrition information must be visible when ordering.

For more information:

Delaware Division of Public Health, http://www.dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/dph

Nemours Health and Prevention Services, www.nemours.org

American Heart Association, www.americanheart.org

References:

National Restaurant Association, www.restaurant.org