Menu labeling has nominal effects

By ACSH Staff — October 13, 2010

The last time you were at McDonald’s, you may have thought twice about whether or not to indulge in a Big Mac after reading its total calorie content — or maybe you didn’t. According to a study presented at the annual Obesity Society meeting in San Diego yesterday, laws requiring fast-food restaurant chains to display nutritional information on menus or menu boards cause only a modest reduction in calorie consumption in overweight or obese children and has little effect on normal-weight kids.

The team compared 75 parent-child pairs in Seattle before and after the menu labeling law went into effect to 58 parent-child pairs in San Diego, where there were no menu labeling regulations in place. The results indicate that calorie content for meals dropped by 85 on average in overweight children and by 128 calories in overweight parents. But average calorie consumption did not decrease among children after the regulation was enacted.

“It would be interesting to see over time whether or not menu labeling has some impact on weight, although I wonder how that could be accurately measured,” muses ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross.

“This is a classic example of a consumer rights issue and an anti-government intrusion issue in direct conflict with one another,” adds Dr. Ross. “On the one hand, you could say that people who want to use calorie content information should have a right to have it, but on the other hand, you could argue that the government shouldn’t be forcing restaurants into doing this.”

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