Cut calories with cash, not labels

By ACSH Staff — July 8, 2011

With two-thirds of U.S. adults and one-third of children either obese or overweight, public health officials are scrambling to come up with solutions to this growing problem. Calorie labels, which will be instituted nationwide in chain restaurants next year as part of ObamaCare legislation, have already been in place in New York for the past two years. But now research provides evidence that posting calorie counts may not be as effective as expected.

One study conducted at New York University found that when menu labeling went into effect, low-income fast-food diners did not change their eating behaviors. Even those who claimed that calorie information would influence their food choices still ordered high calorie meals. Another study evaluating the ordering habits of fast food restaurant patrons in King County, Washington, came up with similar results: Mandatory calorie labeling didn't lead to healthier food purchases.

That's why George Loewenstein, a behavioral economist at Carnegie Mellon University, believes that the menu labeling policy has moved way beyond the science and that it would be beneficial to slow down. In an editorial in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, he asks why the enthusiasm for the policy is so pervasive, given the paucity of data showing that it's effective in curbing obesity.

Health experts are now acknowledging that, even when you supply consumers with nutritional information, the problem remains a lack of self-control. Interestingly, those who pay the most attention to calorie counts are often people who are already fit and don't need to be so health-conscious.

While some experts argue that menu labeling will have little impact on helping people to slim down, ACSH's Cheryl Martin, argues that the new policy is still an important educational tool. When I walk into a McDonald's for lunch and treat myself to a Big Mac, I am now aware of how many calories it's packing, and I'll make adjustments later in the day in order to compensate, she says. For instance, I might just have a salad for dinner instead. Obviously, not everyone will do this, but at least the public health community has done its part to ensure that people are equipped with the information they need to make appropriate choices. There are no quick-fix solutions to obesity, particularly when it comes to changing consumer habits.

In theory, that logic should hold, but in reality, most people forget about their caloric intake as the day progresses. Your humble scribe believes that, although people might plan to balance high-calorie meals with lower calorie fare later, the truth is, they often don't.

Well, if menu labeling isn't doing enough to get people to trim their waistlines, perhaps it's welcome news that paying by cash makes a difference in our food shopping purchases. A new study published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* by Manoj Thomas, assistant professor of
marketing at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, found [2] that people who buy groceries at the supermarket with a credit or debit card are more prone to impulse buys of vice products, such as cookies or chips.

Analyzing register receipts for payment methods, researchers asked participants to rate foods they perceived to be healthy, unhealthy, impulse buys, and planned purchases. The unsurprising findings: Shoppers paying with plastic purchased more food considered impulsive and unhealthy. As Thomas notes, Vice spending is more susceptible to pain of payment. Products perceived as more virtuous, on the other hand, can be more easily justified in terms of spending and, therefore, don't elicit feelings of regret.

COPYRIGHT © 1978-2016 BY THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON SCIENCE AND HEALTH

Links