Nutritional content of smaller-chain restaurants may be worse than fast-food

By ACSH Staff — May 15, 2013

When dining out at a restaurant, you might be getting more than you’re paying for in terms of calories, fat and cholesterol that is. According to two new studies published in JAMA, even though fast food often gets a bad reputation, smaller chain restaurants may actually be more harmful to your health. And it doesn’t seem like things are changing so quickly in terms of reformulations of restaurant foods.

Researchers from the University of Toronto analyzed nutritional information from 19 sit-down chain restaurants and found that the average meal had about 1100 calories, as compared to about 900 in the average fast food meal. In addition, meals contained an average of 151 percent of recommended daily salt intake, 89 percent of daily fat, and 60 percent of daily cholesterol, according to study authors.

The second study, conducted by researchers from Tufts University in Boston, looked at some of the most popular menu items in different food categories at independent and small-chain eateries defined as restaurants with less than 20 locations. Using bomb calorimetry a method of determining calorie content by measuring the heat given off when a food is burned they found that the average entrée contained about 1300 calories.

Tufts investigator Lorien Urban says, Considering that more than half the restaurants in the U.S. are independent or small chain and won’t be covered by labeling requirements in the future, this is something consumers need to pay attention to. It’s also important because nearly 40 percent of meals are now eaten outside the home.

ACSH’s Ariel Savransky comments: It is important to pay attention to what you are eating in a sit-down restaurant and take into account that restaurant meals tend to be more high-calorie than something consumed in the home, or even in fast-food restaurants. But there’s nothing wrong with enjoying a meal out and making a habit of sharing with your dining companions, or ordering appetizer-sized portions as your main meal may help you to consume fewer calories.