

# With Calorie Postings, You Can Lead a Horse to Water...



By Ruth Kava — November 2, 2015



[1]

One policy that has elicited much *sturm und drang* is the requirement that chain restaurants post the calorie content of their foods on their menus. In New York City, that requirement has been law since 2009. The purpose was to encourage our overly-obese population to pay attention to the amount of calories they're consuming in the hopes that the knowledge would encourage them to eat less.

So how effective has that law been? Not very, according to some new research.

The latest edition of the journal [Health Affairs](#) [2] reports a study by Julia A. Wolfson, MPP, from the Bloomberg School of Public Health, and colleagues. The researchers analyzed sales data from 2012 to 2014, from 66 of the largest U.S. chain restaurants. They found that restaurants with labelled menus had about 140 fewer calories per item than did restaurants that didn't post calories (260 vs. 399 calories, respectively).

"The biggest impact from mandatory menu labeling may come from restaurants decreasing the calories in their menu items, rather than expecting consumers to notice the calorie information and, subsequently, order different menu items," Ms. Wolfson noted. "Given how often Americans eat in restaurants, if more chain restaurants decrease calories on their menus to a level that we are seeing in restaurants that already label, this has the potential to reduce population-level obesity."

However, the real question is whether or not consumers actually used the available information to decrease calorie consumption on their own. In a similar study in the same journal, led by Dr. Brian Elbel at the NYU Langone Medical Center, researchers compared food orders placed by nearly 7,700 fast-food diners in New York City and some New Jersey cities. The data came from orders placed between January 2013 and June 2014.

These researchers found that the calorie counts of consumer orders averaged between 804 and

839 calories per meal at menu-labelled restaurants, and between 802 and 857 calories per meal in non-labelled restaurants meaning they were virtually identical.

"Our study suggests that menu labeling, in particular at fast-food restaurants, will not on its own lead to any lasting reductions in calories consumed," Dr. Elbel said.

In addition, the investigators also noted that the number of people paying attention to calorie labels decreased over time it was 45 percent in 2013, but dropped to 37 percent by the end of the study in 2014.

What do we learn from these studies?

Well, while it's reasonable to provide people with information about the calorie content of their foods, it is obviously unreasonable to expect that alone to affect their food choices and thus their body weights. Government actions alone aren't effective if consumers are not also educated about what they should, or shouldn't be, consuming. The real problem is how to motivate people to take appropriate actions for their own health and well-being.

Or, to put it another way, how to get that horse to drink.

---

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

---

**Source URL:** <https://www.acsh.org/news/2015/11/02/with-calorie-postings-you-can-lead-a-horse-to-water>

**Links**

[1] <http://acsh.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Screen-Shot-2015-11-02-at-12.31.57-PM-e1446485615384.png>

[2] <http://www.healthaffairs.org/>