



Do homework before eating out

I recently noticed that my favorite fast-food restaurant lists the calories of what I'm eating on the wrapper. I was shocked at how high the calories were. Is it just me, or are most people unaware of how many calories are in fast food?

It's not just you. Many people are blissfully unaware of how many calories they consume, particularly when they eat out.

And that can be a large portion of the diet, considering that about half of Americans' food dollars are spent on meals prepared outside the home.

Some restaurants already include calorie counts on their menus, which could help people like you who want to make better choices. Unfortunately, though, the implementation of a 2010 federal law requiring any restaurant or other food-service operation that has 20 or more locations to list calories at the point of purchase has stalled as the Food and Drug Administration tries to iron out the details.

But in many cases you can find such information relatively easily. Just go to a restaurant's website and see if it has nutrition information listed for its menu items. If not, do a Web search — several diet and fitness websites offer such information, gathered from the restaurants or from members of the sites.

Just guessing about calorie counts isn't a good strategy. In fact, a study

recently published in the journal of the British Medical Association showed that Americans tend to underestimate calories, at least in fast-food meals.

The researchers asked more than 3,300 adults, adolescents and school-age children visiting McDonald's, Burger King, Subway, KFC, Dunkin' Donuts and Wendy's in four cities in New England to estimate the calories in meals they had just purchased. Then, using the customer's receipt and the restaurants' nutrition information, they calculated the actual calories in the meals.

More than two-thirds of the participants underestimated the calories in their meals, with about one-quarter underestimating by 500 calories or more.

Keep in mind that knowing how many calories you're consuming is just the first step. You also need to know how many calories you should be consuming. For that information, which is based in part on age, gender and daily physical activity, see the chart from the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans at <http://bit.ly/calneeds>. That way you can judge whether your favorite fast-food meal is within the range of your calorie needs.

Chow Line is a service of Ohio State University's College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences and its outreach and research arms, Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Chow Line, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH, 43210-1044, or filipic.3@osu.edu.



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