

Calorie and Sodium Menu Labelling

Menu labelling is a type of food labelling where nutrition information is provided on restaurant menus at or before the point of sale. Menu labelling ensures consumers are better able to make informed and healthier food and beverage choices when eating out. Toronto Public Health's [report](#) recommends mandating chain restaurants to put calorie and sodium values on menus and menu boards and encourages smaller independent restaurants to participate in menu labelling on a voluntary basis.

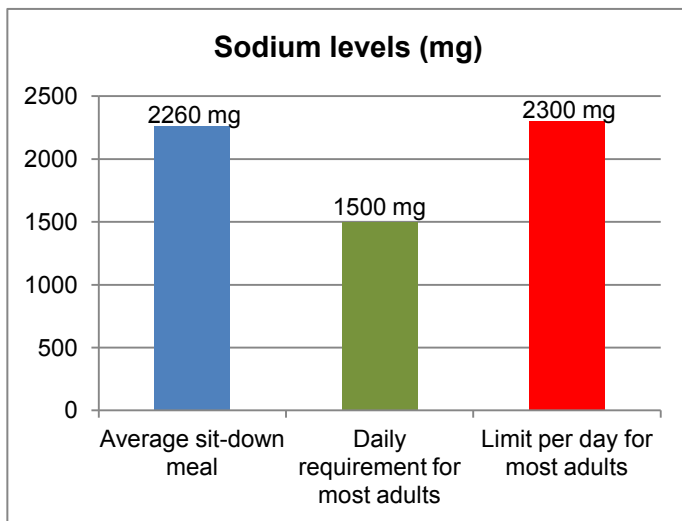
Why Menu Labelling?

Canadians eat in restaurants often

Canadians are eating out more than ever before. About 60% of Canadians are eating out one or more times per week, nearly 40% of Canadians eat out at least a few times per week, and about 7% eat out on a daily basis. In a local survey, 71% of Torontonians reported eating at a sit-down restaurant or fast food outlet (or both) at least once in the previous week.

Levels of calories and sodium in Canadian restaurant meals are high

The average meal at a Canadian sit-down restaurant contains 1130 calories and 2260 mg of sodium. That's more than half the calories and one-and-a half times the sodium most adults need in a whole day. Fast food restaurant menu items contain on average 1011 mg of sodium and side dishes contain an additional 736 mg of sodium.



Source: Mary L'Abbé & Mary Scourboutakos presentation at Writing on the Wall Symposium, Toronto, September 11, 2012.

Examples of Popular Restaurant Meals

- Caesar Salad and Spaghetti with Meatballs
1940 calories and 3120 mg sodium
- Burger and French Fries
1170 calories and 2410 mg sodium
- Chicken Nuggets, French Fries (L), Cola (M)
1310 calories and 1550 mg sodium
- Club Sandwich and Sweet Potato Fries
1800 calories and 3510 mg of sodium
- Chicken Pad Thai
1076 calories and 2547 mg of sodium
- Asian Chicken Salad
877 calories and 3056 mg of sodium
- Entrée Salad with Scoops of Tuna
1060 calories and 1560 mg of sodium

Notes: Nutritional content varies by restaurant. Most adults need about 2000 calories a day.

Consumers underestimate the calorie and sodium levels of many typical restaurant meals

The levels of calories and sodium vary widely both within and between restaurants, making it virtually impossible to make a reasoned guess based on healthy eating recommendations alone. Large portion sizes and misleading marketing make it even harder for people to guess what they are consuming.

High rates of obesity and chronic diseases

High rates of obesity and chronic diseases are significant public health concerns. Carrying excess weight is a risk factor for many health concerns including diabetes, cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, and mental health issues. High blood pressure, or hypertension, is among the leading preventable risk factors for death in Canada. High calorie and sodium intakes increase the risk of overweight and high blood pressure, which can lead to heart disease, stroke, and kidney disease.

Mandatory menu labelling is needed

Voluntary nutrition information disclosure programs in Canada have not achieved the goals of providing simple, readily available information by which the public can make informed choices when they eat out. When nutrition information is available 'upon request' less than 5% of people see it and/or use it. When key nutrition information is available at the point of purchase, at least 50 - 70% of customers notice it.

In Toronto:

- 46% of adults and about 21% of adolescents are either overweight or obese
- Almost 24% of residents 20 years of age and older have high blood pressure

Strong public support for menu labelling legislation

Consumers want nutrition information when dining out. Over 90% of Canadians and Ontarians support menu labelling in fast food restaurants and 86% of Canadians want nutrition information, including calories, readily available and clearly visible at the point of purchase at all restaurants. Recent Toronto surveys showed that 83% of Torontonians would like to have nutritional information available on the menu - 78% said that they would use nutrition information 'at least sometimes' if it were readily available. Of the eight nutrients they were asked about, most wanted to see calories (79%) and sodium (74%) on the menu.

Menu labelling can contribute to reducing rates of obesity and hypertension

Menu labelling is used by consumers to make healthier menu choices and can prompt restaurants to create healthier menu options. In one study on the potential effects of menu labelling, researchers estimated a 40% potential reduction in weight gain at the population level if 10% of customers decreased their average meal by 100 calories. Early evidence shows that 15-30% of people use menu labelling to reduce the number of calories ordered by 50-100 calories. A University of Toronto study with a national panel of about 3000 Canadians showed that after seeing menu labelling, 26% of people changed their order. This group ordered, on average, 209 fewer calories and 523 mg less sodium. Menu labelling was particularly useful for people who were trying to lose weight.



-106 calories

A large study found that **1 in 6 customers** in New York City chain restaurants used the calorie information. Those customers purchased, on average, **106 fewer calories** than customers who did not see or use the information.

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