

Health Promotion Practitioner

Practical solutions for health enhancement programming

Who's in Charge of My Health?

Calories Count on Menus Says NYC

Recently, a federal appeals court said the new rule requiring New York City fast-food restaurants to post calories is lawful. A spokeswoman notes the city expects restaurants to begin complying with the rule immediately. The health code provision, which affects businesses with 15+ establishments nationwide, requires that restaurants post calories on menus and menu boards — in the same font and format used to display the item's name or price.

As health promoters we all know that calories matter. But does posting calories on fast-food menus do anything to help consumers maintain a healthy diet (presumably the rule's intent)? Not likely. Most fast-food patrons aren't there for healthy fare. The average McDonald's franchise sells roughly 50 salads a day and 50-60 Premium Chicken Sandwiches, compared with 300-400 double cheeseburgers from the Dollar Menu. Tasty, filling, cheap, fast.

Posting calories alongside price won't change the facts. Since 1977, meals and snacks eaten at fast-food restaurants have increased by more than 200%. During that same period, the country's seen a dramatic increase in obesity.

Other cities are likely to follow NYC, just as they did with the trans-fat ban in the last year. And while you may believe the rule is harmless at worst, and may

help some at best, we believe it's a bad move for public health. It shifts the focus away from what would really make a difference in people's lives: taking personal responsibility for their own health.

Pack a Lunch

Your job as health promoter, first and foremost, is to reinforce the message that individuals do have control of their health habits — at work and throughout the rest of their lives. Experiencing that sense of control can begin with something as simple as a pack-your-lunch program. Some ideas:

- Work with a Registered Dietitian. Although a healthy diet is pretty straightforward, an expert lends credibility and can more effectively handle the inevitable questions from people with special nutrition needs.
- Create a catchy program name (*such as Pack and Prosper*) and highlight all the benefits — health and economic — in your promotional materials.
- Provide a free lunch the first day with several variations. Use the different lunches as models of healthy, balanced meals — stressing variety, simplicity, and savings.
- Outline a 3-day lunch menu with lots of choices. Give participants the assignment to shop for 3 days of healthy lunches they can pack and bring to 3

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consecutive lunch meetings. Compare these to the combo meals they might have eaten otherwise — cost, calories, fat, etc., — then extrapolate that over a year. The savings alone will be impressive: more than \$500 a year just on lunch!

- Use a portion of the final day to promote the next program — *Dining In to Win* — with a similar model that focuses on home cooking for health and savings.

It's time to put back responsibility for health squarely where it belongs — the individual, not the government or restaurants. For most Americans, healthy food is

literally across the street from fast food. Never has there been a greater abundance of, or access to, fresh produce, lean protein sources, whole-grain foods, and high-quality, low-fat dairy products.

Population health will improve when individuals in the population embrace “it’s up to me.” By providing resources that support healthy decisions, you give participants the tools and confidence to take control and improve their health. 🇺🇸



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