

TO: Chair and Members of the Board of Health

FROM: Christopher Mackie, Medical Officer of Health

DATE: 2013 November 21

MENU LABELLING: IMPROVING THE FOOD ENVIRONMENT

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Board of Health:

1. *Endorse the recommendation that clear, prominent labelling of calorie and sodium content on menus, including reference values, be required through provincial legislation as proposed by the Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health (OSNPPH) [Position Statement \(Appendix A\)](#), “Serving Up Nutrition Information in Ontario Restaurants” and [Toronto Public Health \(Appendix B\)](#).*
2. *Communicate its support for provincial menu labelling legislation by sending a letter to the Premier of Ontario, the Minister of Health and Long-Term Care, local members of parliament, the Ontario Public Health Association and the Association of Local Public Health Agencies (alPHA).*
3. *Endorse the OSNPPH [Position Paper \(Appendix A\)](#) in its entirety and forward this Report to all Boards of Health across Ontario to communicate its support for the implementation of local, evidence-based complementary menu labelling initiatives.*

Key Points

- Addressing unhealthy diets high in calories and sodium would result in a major increase in life expectancy – likely greater than two more years for every per person in Ontario.
- Food environments, particularly restaurants, can affect people’s food choices in ways that are difficult to overcome through individual knowledge, skills, and good intentions.
- Menu labelling interventions may have a more substantial effect on higher-calorie consumers, influencing higher-risk, priority populations.
- Menu labelling legislation should emphasize clear, prominent labelling of calorie and sodium content on menus and include reference values and nutrient profiles to be optimally effective.

The Issue

Increasingly, the food environment has been implicated in rising rates of overweight and obesity, even more than individual knowledge, skills and intentions. It has been estimated that obesity costs Ontario billions of dollars annually. Addressing unhealthy diets high in calories and sodium would result in a major increase in life expectancy – likely greater than two more years for every per person in Ontario. There is strong evidence that consuming excessive calories and sodium has long-term negative health implications.

Over 60% of Canadians eat out at least once per week, and multiple studies have associated increased consumption of restaurant meals with excessive intakes of calories, sodium and fat. It is difficult for consumers to estimate the calorie and sodium content of restaurant meals. For nearly a decade, the World Health Organization has been recommending that governments include food labelling in strategies to prevent non-communicable diseases in hopes that such interventions will enable consumers to make informed decisions. In October, the Ontario government revealed plans to re-introduce legislation to implement

mandatory menu labelling in the province through consultations with key stakeholders from the health and food industry sectors.

Nutrition labelling on menus is seen by more consumers than other methods of nutrition communication (e.g., on-premise brochures, restaurant's website). When menu labelling is provided, one study found that 34% of people used the information to make purchasing decisions, compared to as few as 0.1% of consumers when nutrition information is provided somewhere other than the menu.

Menu labelling may have a larger effect on individuals consuming higher calories compared to those consuming fewer. A study of consumers at Starbucks® locations in three American states found that overall, consumers reduced the calorie content of their orders 6% upon implementation of menu labelling. However, consumers in the Starbucks® study whose orders had been over 250 calories reduced the calorie content of their meals by 26%. This indicates potential for menu labelling interventions to target consumers at increased risk. Although small, such an effect is significant on a population level. If only 10% of customers reduced their order by 100 calories, menu labelling could prevent 40% of the average annual weight gain in consumers five years of age and older.

The type and amount of information provided at point of sale also seems to impact the effectiveness of menu labelling campaigns. Research shows that providing too much information may be counterproductive, as over 70% of consumers faced with only calorie content remembered the information whereas only 49% remembered the information when 4 nutrients were provided. As such, it is recommended that only calories and sodium content be provided on menus to prevent information overload.

Need for Legislation

Voluntary menu labelling measures have proven ineffective; without strong legislation, nutrition information tends not to be provided clearly or consistently, leading to consumer confusion. As well, mandatory menu labelling has the potential to reach beyond the individuals who read and understand nutrition information to everyone who eats at restaurants. If menu labelling is implemented through legislation, provision of genuinely healthier foods may become a competitive advantage, stimulating restaurants to voluntarily lower their calorie and sodium content.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Recent surveys have shown that 70-73% of Canadians feel it is important for restaurants to display calorie and sodium content in their menu items. The adoption of U.S. federal legislation for menu labelling means that US outlets of large chain restaurants, many that operate in Canada, are preparing to display nutrient content. Several public health units and organizations such as Canada's Sodium Reduction Task Force, the OSNPPH, Cancer Care Ontario, and the Healthy Kids Panel have endorsed menu labelling as an improvement strategy targeting the food environment.

The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (MOHLTC) hosted a series of consultations with key stakeholders from the food, beverage and advertising industries, the health sector and families. alPHA is preparing a submission to MOHLTC to speak to the need for provincial menu labelling legislation and marketing restrictions to children and youth based on the latest evidence. Health Unit staff will support alPHA's submission to MOHLTC by forwarding recommendations for consideration.

This report was prepared by Ms. Lisa Doerr, Dietetic Intern; Dr. Heather Thomas RD, Public Health Dietitian, and Ms. Linda Stobo, Manager, Chronic Disease Prevention and Tobacco Control Team.



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This report addresses the following requirement(s) of the Ontario Public Health Standards: Chronic Disease and Injuries Program Standards: 4, 5, 6, 7, 11, 12.