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MOST ENTRÉES AT CHAIN RESTAURANTS FAIL TO MEET FEDERAL NUTRITION RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADULTS OR CHILDREN

New Study also Examines Criteria for the Restaurant Industry's Healthy Dining Program

Santa Monica, Calif.,—Ninety-six percent of main entrées offered by top U.S. chain restaurants fail to meet daily limits for calories, sodium, fat and saturated fat recommended by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), according to a study published online in [Public Health Nutrition](#).

The study, which was supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation through its [Healthy Eating Research](#) program, examined the nutritional content of 30,923 menu items—including items from children's menus—from 245 restaurants across the United States.

"This is the first study to look at the nutritional landscape of all types of restaurants in the United States, including fast-food, fast-casual, take-out, buffet, sit-down/family-style, and upscale restaurants," said Helen Wu, Ph.D. candidate at the Pardee RAND Graduate School and assistant policy analyst with RAND Corporation. Between February and May 2010, Wu and Roland Sturm, senior economist at RAND, reviewed restaurant websites for nutrition information. They found that, although the majority of main entrées they reviewed did not exceed 667 calories, which is one-third of the calories the USDA estimates that the average adult needs each day, very few entrées met recommended daily limits for calories, sodium, saturated fat, and fat combined.

"Many items may appear healthy based on calories, but actually can be very unhealthy when you consider other important nutrition criteria," Wu said. Wu also noted that calorie levels for restaurant foods appeared to be surprisingly low, but added that this was partially an artifact of how serving sizes were reported on websites. "It will be important for federal regulators to consider this as they finalize regulations for menu labeling," Wu said.

Moreover, the study showed that nutrition criteria for the [Healthy Dining](#) program supported by the restaurant industry are not as strong as USDA nutrition recommendations. For example, under the Healthy Dining criteria used by many chain restaurants, up to 42 percent of main entrées could potentially be labeled "healthy."

"The restaurant industry-supported healthy seal of approval is too generous on sodium," Wu said. "It allows up to 2,000 milligrams sodium for one main entrée, even though the USDA's daily recommended limit for most adults is 2,300 milligrams."

Wu and Sturm also discovered that appetizers have more calories, fat, saturated fat, and sodium than all other types of menu items—even main entrées. From the sample studied, appetizers had an average of 813 calories, compared with main entrées, which averaged 674 calories per serving. "People also may be surprised to learn that children's specialty beverages, which are often very sugary and dessert-like, may have more calories and fat than similar beverages on regular menus," said Wu.

The study also found that the availability of nutrition information varied by cuisine and service type. For example, nearly 83 percent of fast-casual restaurants, such as Au Bon Pain and Panera Bread, provided nutrition information on their websites, while only 12 percent of upscale restaurants and 50 percent of family-style restaurants provided nutrition information online. “Restaurants that provided information only upon email request had menu items with significantly more calories, fat, and sodium, compared with restaurants that posted it all in one place online,” said Wu.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration is poised to publish final regulations mandating that chain restaurants that operate at least 20 U.S. locations post calorie counts on menus and provide additional information, such as total fat, sodium, and cholesterol, upon customer request. “This will level the playing field in terms of transparency, and those seeking information will be able to access it more quickly than having to go to a website,” said Wu.

In the United States, 82 percent of adults eat out at least once a week. Previous research has shown that increased consumption of food away from home is associated with increased consumption of calories, fat, and sodium. Currently, two-thirds of U.S. adults and nearly one-third of children and teens are obese or overweight.

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About Healthy Eating Research

Healthy Eating Research is a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF). The program supports research on environmental and policy strategies with strong potential to promote healthy eating among children to prevent obesity, especially among lower-income and racial and ethnic populations at highest risk for obesity. For more information, visit www.healthyeatingresearch.org.

About the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

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