

Informed Eating: Calorie Labeling for Ready-to-Eat Food at Supermarkets and Convenience Stores



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CSPI and the Nutrition Policy Project

The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) is a nonprofit organization based in Washington, D.C. Since 1971, CSPI has been working to improve the public's health through its work on nutrition, food safety, and alcohol issues. CSPI is supported primarily by the 850,000 subscribers to its Nutrition Action Healthletter and philanthropic foundations.

CSPI's Nutrition Policy Project works with concerned citizens, health professionals, government officials and other nonprofit organizations to strengthen national, state, and local policies and programs to promote healthy eating and reduce obesity.

Our goals are to help reduce the illnesses, disabilities, and deaths caused by diet- and obesity-related diseases and conditions, such as heart disease, cancer, high blood pressure, and diabetes. For more information on CSPI's projects and other policies to promote healthy eating and reduce obesity, visit www.cspinet.org/nutritionpolicy.

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Informed Eating: Calorie Labeling for Ready-to-Eat Food at Supermarkets and Convenience Stores is available on-line, free of charge at <http://www.cspinet.org/new/pdf/supermarket-labeling-report.pdf>

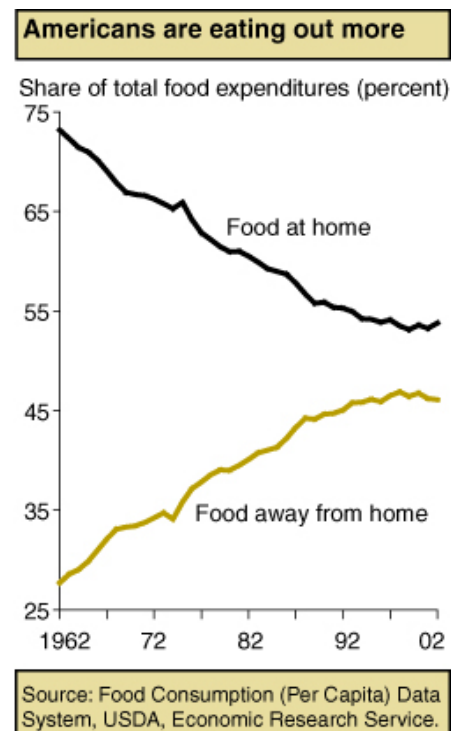
Introduction

In March 2010, Congress passed the Affordable Care Act, a national law which included a requirement for chain food-service establishments with 20 or more outlets to list calorie information on menus, menu boards, and food display tags. The law also requires calorie disclosures in “similar” retail food establishments. Under proposed guidance in August 2010, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) broadly defined similar food establishments, as Congress intended, and included coffee shops, delicatessens, food take out and/or delivery establishments, grocery stores, convenience stores, movie theaters, cafeterias, bakeries, retail confectionary stores, food service vendors, and transportation carriers.¹

The FDA has since proposed menu labeling regulations.² In the proposed regulations, the Administration significantly scaled back the scope of which establishments would have to provide calorie information. That proposal would significantly limit the ability of Americans to make informed dietary choices in many supermarkets and convenience stores. In addition, the FDA’s proposed definition would be unfair to many businesses, because some chains that sell prepared foods would be covered by the regulations and others would not. The final rule should cover all retail food establishments that sell restaurant-type food to provide the widest opportunity for consumers to make informed choices and be fair to businesses.

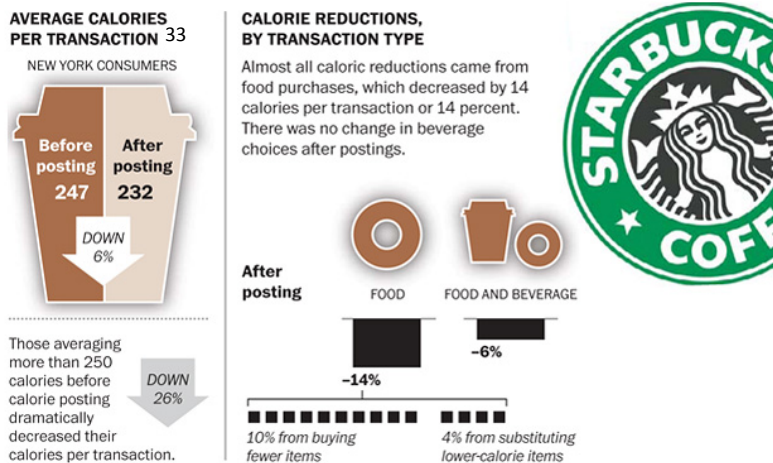
Calorie information is on practically all packaged foods and is seen by many as a consumer’s right. Calorie content is an important aspect of food—for people who are counting calories, or who are hungry and want more calories, or who might want to have a sense of whether a meal is splittable. When the packaged food-labeling law was passed, Congress, at the behest of the restaurant industry, specifically exempted restaurant foods. The 2010 law rectified that exclusion.

The prevalence of obesity has tripled in both children and adults since the late 1970s.^{3,4} Over the past several decades, overall calorie consumption has increased.⁵ Food consumed outside the home provides one-third of the calories in American’s diets.⁶ More than three dozen studies show that eating out more frequently is associated with obesity, higher body fatness, or higher



BMI.^{7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16,17,18,19,20,21,22,23,24} Without clear, easy-to-use nutrition information at the point of ordering, it's difficult to make informed and healthy choices.^{25,26,27,28,29,30,31}

Prior to passage of the national menu-labeling law, several states and localities, including California, Vermont, New York City, Philadelphia, and Seattle/King County, implemented menu labeling policies. Though not all studies are able to measure an effect of menu labeling, several show that calorie labeling is helping consumers make lower-calorie selections when eating out and is encouraging companies to reformulate products and introduce healthier options.



Perhaps the largest and best study, which used Starbucks sales data, found that menu labeling had little effect on beverage calories, but reduced calories in food purchases by 14 percent. That constituted a six percent decrease in average calories per transaction. For people buying more calories, the effect was bigger: a 26 percent

decrease.^{32,33} A study conducted by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene found that 1 in 6 customers used the calorie information at chain restaurants and purchased 100 fewer calories than customers who did not see or use the calorie information.³⁴

Menu labeling has spurred restaurants to reformulate some of their products and introduce lower-calorie dishes, and could do the same in other venues. For instance, Seattle/King County chain restaurants decreased entrées by an average of 41 calories, 18 months after implementation of menu labeling. Sit-down restaurant entrées decreased by 73 calories and quick-service outlets entrees decreased by 19 calories. Saturated fat and sodium levels also decreased significantly.³⁵ Starbucks reduced the average calorie content of its pastry items by five percent and beverage items by 14 percent nationally at the same time that New York City's menu labeling requirements went into effect. Cosi switched to reduced-fat dressing and half the cheese in their Signature Salad, reducing calories from 610 to 380. In addition, many popular chains have introduced smaller portions on their menus (for example, The Cheesecake Factory's "Small Plates & Snacks and T.G.I. Friday's "Right Portion, Right Price").

Increasingly, supermarkets and convenience stores are competing with restaurants to attract customers who want prepared entrees and convenient, prepared meals. Supermarkets are similar to chain restaurants in a number of ways: both are often operated by local owners (franchises or in cooperatives); they have standard recipes for prepared foods, but allow for variation between locations; they have bakeries, buffets, hot bars, and salad bars; and many supermarkets have tables for eating. Convenience stores sell a wide range of standardized hot and cold prepared foods, including sandwiches, pizza, nachos, and burritos.

Supermarkets Are Similar to Restaurants in Many Ways

Both Supermarkets and Restaurants have bakeries

Panera Bread Bakery



Safeway Bakery



Both Supermarkets and Restaurants have buffets

Golden Corral Buffet



Wegman's Hot Bar



Both Supermarkets and Restaurants have salad bars

Pizza Hut Salad Bar

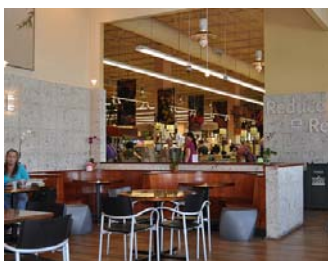


Wegman's Salad Bar



Many supermarkets have tables for eating in—some restaurants do not

Whole Foods Dining Room



Auntie Anne's restaurant (no seating)



Consumers increasingly view convenience stores similarly to fast-food chains, and they are increasingly competing with them. Convenience stores are increasing the number of prepared food items, such as 7-Eleven's pizza slices, chicken tenders, nachos, and burritos. According to a Technomic, Inc. poll, 82 percent of respondents said they buy prepared foods or beverages from a convenience store once a month, with 52 percent doing so once a week.³⁶ Many convenience stores are among the top 100 chain food-service establishments in the United States, including 7-Eleven (#30), Circle K (#70), Wawa (#78), Casey's General Stores (#82), Sheetz (#90).³⁷

Prepared-meal sales from supermarkets are also on the rise. Many large supermarkets have bakeries, delis, and salad bars, and sell prepared foods, such as rotisserie chicken, hot soups, macaroni and cheese, sushi, and quesadillas. According to the research firm Packaged Facts, in 2010 64 percent of respondents said they had purchased a prepared meal from a supermarket within the last month.^{38,39}

Another growing trend within supermarkets is hiring registered dietitians at the store and corporate levels.⁴⁰ For example, the Hy-Vee supermarket chain has a dietitian in 195 out of its 235 supermarkets. Having registered dietitians on staff shows a corporate commitment to nutrition, indicates that supermarket customers are interested in nutrition, and demonstrates that the supermarket chain could provide calorie information because the dietitian could inexpensively run computerized nutrition analyses of a supermarket's prepared foods.

According to a national survey commissioned by CSPI, 81 percent of Americans favor having supermarkets provide calorie information for their prepared, restaurant-type foods, such as rotisserie chicken, sandwiches, and soups, and 77 percent want calorie labeling for the prepared foods available at convenience stores.⁴¹ People not only want nutrition information, they need it. Consumers, and even nutrition professionals, are unable to accurately estimate the calorie content of popular restaurant foods.^{42,43,44,45,46,47,48}

We undertook this study to assess the feasibility of supermarkets' and convenience stores' providing nutrition information for their prepared, restaurant-type foods to their customers.

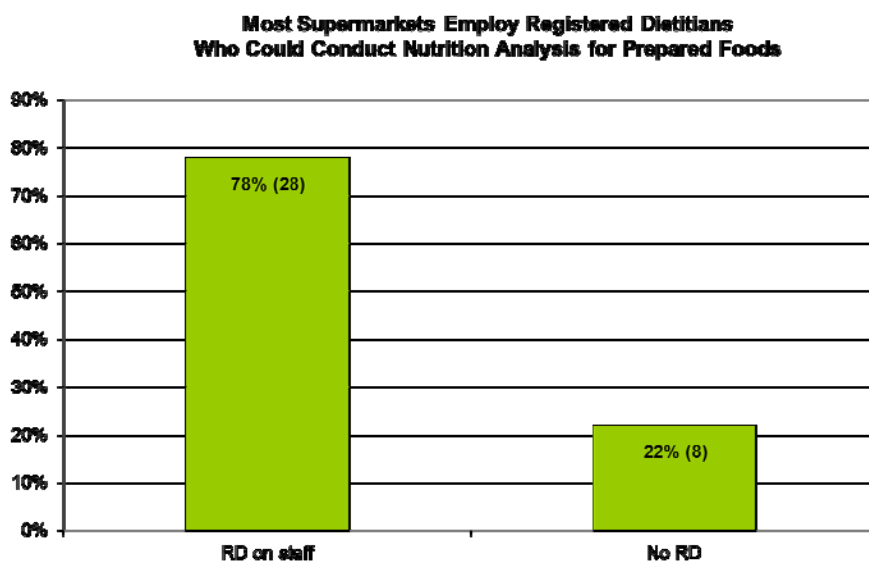
Methods

In March and April of 2012, CSPI conducted a survey to assess the availability of prepared foods, nutrition information for those prepared foods, and the employment of registered dietitians at the largest food retailers in the United States. We spoke with customer service representatives and dietitians and searched the retailers' websites to obtain that information. We surveyed the top 50 retailers by revenue according to *Supermarket News*.⁴⁹ We excluded wholesalers, distributors, and dollar stores, resulting in a total sample of 38 retailers, which included supermarkets and one convenience store.

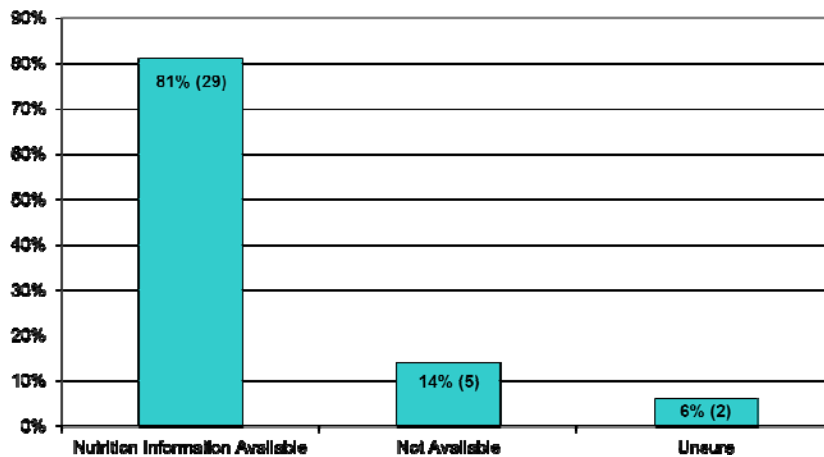
Results and Discussion

Out of the 38 retailers surveyed, we found that 95 percent (36) sold prepared foods. Nutrition information was available for at least some prepared foods in 81 percent (29) of the 36 retailers that carried prepared foods. Registered dietitians were employed either at the corporate or in-store level in 78 percent (28) of the retailers that carried prepared foods.

Implementing calorie labeling for prepared foods in supermarkets and convenience stores should be feasible given that 81 percent of retailers already have nutrition information available for some of their prepared foods, and 78 percent of supermarkets employ registered dietitians who could easily calculate the calorie (and other nutrient) content of prepared foods.



Availability of Nutrition Information in Supermarkets that Carry Prepared Foods



One barrier to informed eating from supermarkets and convenience stores is that few provide nutrition information for all their prepared foods. A second is that some provide nutrition information only through in-store booklets, binders behind the bakery or deli counters, on websites, in-store by request, or through customer service phone lines. The availability of nutrition information for some of their prepared foods shows that stores have the capacity to analyze the rest of their prepared items. However, the approaches that many retail stores are using to provide nutrition information are ineffective.

A study conducted by the New York City health department found that less than eight percent of customers see nutrition information when it is provided via brochures, tray liners, posters, etc.⁵⁰ For example at McDonald's at the time of the study (which was before it posted calories on its menu boards), 95 percent of customers did not notice the calorie information provided via posters or brochures. The *Keystone Forum on Away-from-Home Foods*, a forum of health experts, advocates, and representatives of the restaurant industry established at the request of the FDA, concluded that calorie labeling is most useful at the point of ordering and provided in a standard format that is easy to use and find.⁵¹ More than a dozen states and localities, and in 2010 Congress, concluded that providing calorie information on menus, menu boards, and food display tags is the most effective and consumer-friendly approach.

The costs associated with labeling calories for prepared foods are modest. Most supermarkets are already doing some nutrition analyses, so they seem to have the software and ability to analyze the rest of their prepared food items. In addition, most have dietitians on staff, who could conduct the analyses. For those chains that do not, the cost of menu analysis software can be as low as \$200.⁵² For those that do not have a registered dietitian who could conduct the nutrition analysis, nutrition analysis is available for as low as \$49 or

ten items.⁵³ Once analyzed, supermarkets could inexpensively post the calorie information on display tags placed adjacent to the food items to ensure customers could readily see and use the information.

Similarly, chain convenience stores should be able to provide calorie information. Convenience stores have relatively few prepared foods. They do little to no outside cooking; everything is processed and shipped to them. They could ask their suppliers to provide the necessary nutrition information or could hire an outside firm to analyze their recipes for a modest cost.

Conclusions

This study shows it is feasible for retail stores to provide calorie labeling for prepared foods, as most supermarkets already have nutrition information available for some of their prepared foods and many have registered dietitians on staff who could conduct the nutrition analyses of the remaining foods.

Supermarkets and convenience stores, just like restaurants, sell ready-to-eat, prepared foods. Supermarkets commonly have bakeries, hot food bars, salad bars, and areas for seating. Convenience stores are offering an increasing number of standardized, prepared foods. Calorie labeling of prepared foods in supermarkets and convenience stores would allow consumers to make better-informed decisions before purchasing food items, just as they will be able to do in chain restaurants.

Yet, supermarkets and convenience stores are lobbying Congress and the Administration to be excluded from calorie-labeling requirements. Such an exemption would run counter to Congressional intent; the original sponsors—Senator Tom Harkin and Representative Rosa DeLauro—of the menu-labeling bill support applying menu labeling broadly to retail food establishments.^{54,55} In addition, exempting supermarkets and convenience stores would limit consumer access to nutrition information for a growing source of away-from-home foods. Finally, excluding supermarkets and convenience stores from labeling would be unfair to competing businesses that will be providing calorie information.

The supermarket industry says it is committed to providing nutrition information. The Food Marketing Institute (FMI) states, “the supermarket industry is committed to providing consumers with nutrition information.”⁵⁶ An FMI survey found that “72 percent of

shoppers rated the availability of nutrition and health information as being an important factor in selecting a primary grocery store.”⁵⁷ If the industry is committed to enabling its customers to make informed choices and their customers want that information, supermarkets should not oppose being covered by national calorie labeling. It also would not be inconvenient for convenience stores to provide the same information for their fewer freshly prepared foods.

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