

Restaurant menus and frozen dinners understate calorie counts

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When it comes to calorie counts on restaurant menus and frozen entrees at your supermarket, don't believe everything you read. According to a new study out this week, nutrition disclosure and labeling are not consistently accurate and often understate the actual calorie content of foods.

The study from the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University examined the calorie content of 18 side dishes and entrees from national sit-down chain restaurants, 11 side dishes and entrees from national fast food restaurants and 10 frozen meals purchased from supermarkets in the Boston area. It concentrated on choices advertised as having a low calorie content or less than 500 calories.

Researchers found that the information provided by restaurants on menus or websites understated the actual calorie content measured by an average of 18% and that in two instances by almost 200%. They also **found that free side-dishes offered with a meal can exceed the calorie count of the main entrée.**

The frozen entrée manufacturers did a little better, underestimating their calorie content by only 8% on average. Publishing their results in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, the researchers pointed out that the better performance by manufacturers may be attributed to the fact that the FDA monitors packaged **nutrition fact panel labels** more strictly than restaurant disclosures.

Another possible cause of the inaccuracy of the restaurant chain information is a discrepancy between the portion size contemplated by the disclosure information and the actual portion set before the diner.

The authors also pointed out that the **wrong calorie information can contribute to weight gain since a 5% increase in daily calorie** intake would translate to a **10 pound gain over a one year period.**

These results underline the futility of state and local government efforts to legislate our every calorie in an effort to trim our collective waistlines. **Calories** make sense for some people but **counting** them day in and day out is **not a successful strategy** for most. In the long run it's just not practical.

What's a dieter to do? **Learn portion control rather than calorie counting. Order baked, steamed or broiled rather than fried anything.** If you do check calories, assume that the count is overstated by 20% and eat accordingly. Even better: cook at home.