

Florida calorie count bill fizzles

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How many calories are in the hamburger on the menu at your favorite chain restaurant? With burgers ranging from 250 calories to more than 1,000, it's anybody's guess.

Restaurant goers will soon be getting more help when it comes to making choices about calories. A calorie-labeling requirement for restaurants with 20 or more locations is part of the nation's week-old health care reform. Additional nutrition information will have to be available on request.

The law will require calorie information on restaurant menus, menu boards and drive-through boards, and on vending machines. The regulations must go through a formal rulemaking process with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, said Margo Wootan, nutrition policy director at the Center for Science in the Public Interest. That process must begin no later than a year from now.

The federal law exempts small businesses. A proposed Florida bill HB 783, titled "Prevention of Obesity," would have required every restaurant in the state, even those with just one location, to post calorie counts next to the price of each item.

Too pricey for mom-pop?

Tampa Republican Ed Homan, an orthopedic surgeon who sponsored the proposal, said it has already died due to lobbying and opposition from the Florida Restaurant Association. The bill did not make it out of committee, and since this is Homan's last year in the legislature, he won't be around to reintroduce it.

"My bill was much easier than the national bill," Homan said. "All I asked for was calories. The mom-and-pops would have had two years to be compliant."

Homan said that many consumers don't realize, for example, that the Chicken Alfredo has more calories than the Chicken Piccata.

The Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association opposed the state legislation, saying it would be too costly for mom-and-pop restaurants, some of which are already struggling. Also, unlike the chains, the dishes they serve are not necessarily standardized. They can vary from chef to chef or day to day. The restaurants cannot afford to hire dietitians to have their recipes analyzed and have menus re-designed and printed.

The National Restaurant Association, and its Florida branch, supported the labeling requirements for the chain restaurants. The bill does not apply to daily or temporary specials, or to customized orders.

Homan said restaurants that have undertaken the task of providing calorie counts have found the cost to be minimal.

"It was a bill for the public. The public does not contribute to campaigns. Special interests do," Homan said.

The reasons Homan wanted the legislation are compelling:

- In 2008 almost 50 percent of the money spent on food was spent away from home. A recent national poll by Peter D. Hart Research Associates determined that 79 percent of registered voters favor a law that would require restaurants to provide detailed nutritional information.
- More than 40,000 Florida residents die annually from obesity-related diseases.
- In 2008 more than 60 percent of adults and 30 percent of the children in Florida were overweight and at least half of this number were obese.
- The number of overweight and obese children has tripled in the past 20 years.

While the national law is a step in the right direction, it would have been nice to have the information available at all restaurants. A state initiative would probably have been in place more quickly. The federal mandate could be bogged down for a long time before the information actually appears at restaurants, although some have voluntarily begun providing it.

It's true that nutrition information and calorie counts on packaged foods and beverages sold at supermarkets haven't stopped people from buying bad-for-you items. Since those labeling requirements began 20 years ago, Americans have only become fatter.

But for those who do want to watch what they eat, calorie counts are a useful tool.