

# Families Want Information to Make Healthy Choices: Why We Need Menu Labeling in Delaware

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*Planting the seeds for better health*

## SUMMARY

1. Obesity is a major contributor to preventable illness and death.<sup>1</sup> Delaware has one of the highest rates of childhood obesity in the nation. Thirty-seven percent of Delaware children are overweight or obese.<sup>2</sup>
2. Americans now spend almost half their food dollars and consume a third of their calories on foods made outside the home.<sup>3</sup>
3. Most consumers underestimate the calories in their restaurant and fast food purchases: research has shown that even experienced nutrition professionals underestimate the calorie content of restaurant food.<sup>4</sup>
4. Families want to be able to make better choices: a majority of consumers in six nationally-representative polls said they support requiring restaurants to list nutrition information.<sup>5</sup>

## Childhood Obesity in Delaware

Childhood obesity is a risk to the future of Delaware. With 37 percent of Delaware's children already overweight or obese, the health and economic consequences of the epidemic could be unprecedented. Eighty percent of obese adolescents will remain obese throughout adulthood, resulting in an increased risk for diseases, including cardiovascular disease and diabetes.<sup>6</sup>

Obesity's rising prevalence is responsible for an almost 30 percent increase in medical expenditures nationally.<sup>7</sup> At least \$207 million is estimated to be spent each year to treat obesity-related medical problems in Delaware.<sup>8</sup>

Delaware has taken significant steps toward combating the childhood obesity epidemic, including improving child care regulations and increasing physical activity in selected elementary schools. Delaware's families do not, however, have access to basic information about the energy density of the meals they purchase for their children in fast-food and other restaurants.

More than 20 states and localities are considering policies that would require fast-food and other chain restaurants to provide calories and other nutrition information on menus and menu boards — 4 have already passed policies.<sup>9</sup>

## Why Menu Labeling Is Needed to Fight Obesity

Americans spend almost half their food dollars and consume a third of their calories on foods made outside the home.<sup>10</sup> Children's energy intake increases with the amount of food made outside the home.<sup>11</sup> In a study of more than 4,700 children between 11 and 18 years, boys who ate fast food regularly consumed 800 extra calories per week and girls consumed an extra 660 calories per week. This fast food consumption could result in weight gain of 10 or more pounds per year.<sup>12</sup>

Most parents do not realize which items on a menu are packed with calories. Parents need to know how many calories their children are consuming

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## About Nemours Health and Prevention Services

Nemours Health and Prevention Services (NHPS) is a division of Nemours, one of the nation's largest pediatric health systems, operating the Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children and outpatient facilities throughout the Delaware Valley and northern and central Florida.

The goal of NHPS is to drive long-term improvements in policies and practices that promote child health, and to leverage community strengths and resources to help children grow up healthy. An initial area of emphasis is the prevention of childhood obesity through promotion of healthy lifestyles, the centerpiece of which is the *5-2-1-Almost None* campaign (visit [www.GrowUpHealthy.org](http://www.GrowUpHealthy.org) for details). NHPS is also launching an initiative to promote children's social and emotional health.



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## Our Formula for a Healthy Lifestyle: 5–2–1–Almost None

NHPS is taking a leading role to help people understand the causes and health implications of obesity and the best ways to promote healthier lifestyles among children and families.

5-2-1-Almost None is our formula for a healthy lifestyle.



- Eat five or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day.
- Spend no more than two hours per day in front of a screen (TV, video games, recreational computer time).
- Get at least one hour of physical activity per day.
- Drink almost no sugary beverages like soda and sports drinks.

For more information about our work to make Delaware's Children the Healthiest in the Nation, visit:  
[www.GrowUpHealthy.org](http://www.GrowUpHealthy.org)

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in restaurants and this information is generally hard to find.

Many people, even nutrition professionals, underestimate the calories in fast-food meals. Budget-conscious parents may need to worry the most: some restaurants, eager to attract customers during the economic downturn, are now beginning to offer larger portion sizes for less money.<sup>13</sup>

### Selecting the Right Portions for Children

Typical portion sizes at restaurants and fast food establishments have increased dramatically since the 1970s. The “supersize” meal is viewed as a bargain and in many cases looks like a normally sized meal due to changing norms around portion size. Restaurant portions have changed dramatically since the 1970s. For example:

- The average adult soft drink portion at a fast-food restaurant in the 1950s was eight ounces. Today, the smallest soft drink at one national fast food restaurant is twelve ounces—a 50 percent increase in size. A large soft drink—32 ounces—is four times bigger than the drinks fast-food restaurants used to sell. One of these typically contains 310 calories and the equivalent of almost thirty teaspoons of sugar.<sup>14</sup>
- In 1956, the typical fast food burger patty weighed one ounce. Today, the typical burger patty weighs six ounces. Many fast-food and other restaurants advertise how large their hamburgers have become.<sup>15</sup>
- “Large” fries at one fast food chain were added to the menu in 1972; twenty years later, the chain added “supersize” fries, a serving three

times larger than that offered a generation ago. These supersize fries have 610 calories and 29 grams of fat.<sup>16</sup>

Basic nutritional information — such as calorie content — is available on food labels in grocery stores. This labeling is a federal requirement.<sup>17</sup> Three out of four adults report that they read food labels on packages.<sup>18</sup> Research reveals that the use of food labels is associated with eating more healthful diets.<sup>19</sup>

Such basic nutritional labeling is not generally available to restaurant and fast food customers in Delaware; although some chain restaurants display information on calorie content and other nutritional data on websites or for a few items on the menu, most do not make this information easily accessible to customers.

**Children pay a price for this lack of information. Without knowing, many parents buy the unhealthy, calorie-laden meals on a routine basis, potentially setting children up for a lifetime of weight struggles and serious chronic illnesses.**

Nearly every combination of children's meals at 13 top restaurant chains exceeds the amount of calories that the Institute of Medicine recommends for children aged four through eight, based on three meals daily.<sup>20</sup>

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## Delaware Can Help Parents Make Healthier Menu Choices

Families in Delaware are worried about the impact of obesity on their children: almost nine in ten parents consider “not eating well — that is, eating too much junk food and not enough healthy foods” to be a problem for Delaware’s children and teens, according to a statewide poll.<sup>21</sup>

Delaware policy makers can help these families make healthier choices and provide a model for other states and localities by passing **Senate Bill 81**.

**Senate Bill 81** is garnering support from a range of health, nutrition and children’s advocates across Delaware. The bill enables families to make healthy choices for their children by:

- Requiring that nutritional information be available at the point of ordering;
- Requiring chain restaurants with menus (those with more than 10 outlets nationally) to list the total number of calories (rounded to the nearest 10 calories), grams of saturated fat, grams of carbohydrates and milligrams of sodium next to the menu item for each menu item offered for sale;
- Requiring chain restaurants to provide the information adjacent to each item on the menu in a size and typeface similar to price and other information.

The bill also stipulates that:

- If the restaurant uses a menu board (such as are used in fast food restaurants) or food tags (such as are used in ice cream shops and delicatessens), only information

## RECOMMENDED ACTION STEPS

- 1** The Delaware General Assembly should pass, and Governor Jack Markell should sign, **Senate Bill 81**.
- 2** Public and non-profit agencies concerned with public health and obesity should publicize the importance of healthy eating and physical activity for children.
- 3** Delaware families, educators and organizations should visit **www.GrowUpHealthy.org** for information about living the *5-2-1-Almost None* lifestyle recommended by Nemours Health and Prevention Services.

related to total calories per item is to be on the menu board, provided that a sign clearly indicates that additional nutrition information is available upon request.

- For menu items that come in different flavors and varieties but are listed as a single item (for example, doughnuts or soft drinks), the median value for calories or other nutrition items should be listed.
- Enforcement will be the responsibility of the Delaware Department of Health and Social Services, Division of Public Health.
- One year after passage, the Act shall become effective.

Additional, more detailed information on **S.B. 81** is available at <http://legis.delaware.gov/LIS/LIS145.nsf/vwLegislation/SB+81?Opendocument>

## A Cost-Effective Step to Protect the Health of Delaware’s Children

Some restaurants and policy makers are concerned about the cost of menu labeling to restaurants and government agencies overseeing compliance.

However, many restaurants have already conducted the necessary analysis; much of this information is not publicly and clearly posted for consumers. Even if a restaurant has not conducted the analysis, the cost is relatively small.<sup>22</sup>

Enforcement would rely on an existing public health infrastructure already responsible for monitoring food safety in Delaware restaurants. Whether a restaurant is in compliance will be relatively easy to determine by health inspectors.

Given that inspectors are likely to absorb the monitoring of menu labeling compliance into their current workload, it is anticipated that the legislation’s enactment will result in no additional cost to the state.

Monitoring of food safety is already a critical service provided by government to Delawareans. Menu labeling, given the crisis in childhood obesity, is another vital step Delaware can take to protect public health.

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## Notes

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