

Examiner Column from Dr. Rosana Pellizzari, Medical Officer of Health Peterborough County-City Health Unit

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New Menu Labelling Legislation Forgot the Salt

It's January of a fresh new year and across Peterborough, people are trying to start the year off right by eating healthy and increasing physical activity. At the Health Unit, we are looking forward to new legislation, introduced in November 2014, which would require fast food restaurants to post calorie content of menu items to help consumers make healthier choices when eating out. Polling by Ipsos Reid in 2011 found that 95% of Ontarians want this kind of nutritional information when dining out. And with more and more families consuming meals outside the home, it makes sense to provide the same level of information that is available when purchasing food at the grocery store, where mandatory labelling has been in effect since 2005. On average, each Canadian household visits a restaurant for a meal or snack 520 times a year!

Public Health Inspectors will be responsible for ensuring that restaurants with 20 or more locations are compliant with the new mandatory menu labelling once the Making Healthier Choices Act finally becomes law. Ontario will be the first province in Canada to enact this kind of legislation, which was pioneered by New York City in 2008 and then embraced federally in the U.S in 2010. Here in Ontario, Nickelbelt MPP France Gélinas has made several attempts since 2008 to introduce menu labelling legislation. Her private member bills included a requirement for restaurants to flag high sodium foods, and would have been applicable to restaurant chains with at least five locations.

Although the recommendation for menu labelling legislation came from Ontario's Healthy Kids Panel as a way to prevent childhood obesity, I believe that its focus should be broader and address the overall health of Ontario children. Based on the increasing array of evidence about the high sodium content of restaurant foods, the inability of consumers to estimate sodium content in restaurant foods, the negative health impacts of excessive sodium intake in the Canadian diet and strong public support for posting of sodium content in restaurants, the inclusion of sodium in menu labelling legislation would help Ontarians reduce their intakes and improve their health.

Canadians are eating a tremendous amount of salt: about double the recommended daily intake and much of this is coming from processed foods and restaurant meals. A recent analysis of fast food and sit-down restaurant menu items in Canada reveals that the sodium content in Canadian restaurant foods is alarmingly high. Children's fast food meal items contained, on average, 790 mg of sodium per serving (66% of the daily Adequate Intake (AI) for children) while children's side dishes at these restaurants contained, on average, an additional 377 mg of sodium. In sit-down restaurants, 33% of chicken items, as well as 18% of pizza meals and 17% of hamburgers exceeded the entire daily AI for children. A University of Toronto study published this past November demonstrated that adding sodium to calorie

information on menus helped consumers make healthier choices for both, and a resounding 80% of respondents wanted to see more than just calorie information when dining out.

I am looking forward to seeing the new Making Healthier Choices Act become law in 2015 and congratulate the current government for committing to make this a reality in Ontario. The Board of Health will advocate for the inclusion of sodium and will likely challenge the province to lower its threshold so that more restaurants are required to participate in the new normal. Almost all Canadians indicate that they have done something during the past year to improve or change their eating and drinking habits. Everyone has the right to make an informed decision about their health. Transparent and comprehensive nutrition information needs to be readily available where people live work and play for consumers to take control of what they and their families are eating.

Let's make it even easier to eat healthy by putting the information like sodium and calories right on the menu board, when customers are making their choices. I know I'll be looking for it before I place my order!

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