

# WRITING ON THE WALL

time to put nutrition information on restaurant menus

*Menu*

	\$	Calories*	Sodium (mg) <sup>†</sup>
Cheeseburger	6.99	650	1,000
NY Steak Sandwich	5.50	450	1,500
Fruit Salad	4.00	300	0
Pasta Primavera	9.99	1,100	1,250
Hell's Chicken Penne	9.99	1,300	2,500

\*A typical adult should consume less than 2,000 calories in an entire day.  
†Aim for about 1,500 mg of sodium per day.  
Ask your server for full nutrition information or information about allergens or dyes.



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### **Writing on the Wall: Time to put nutrition information on restaurant menus**

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## Executive Summary

Every year, nutrition-related heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and cancers kill an estimated 48,000 Canadians and cost the economy more than \$7 billion and possibly more than \$30 billion. That puts an enormous strain on provincial budgets and, ultimately, Canadian taxpayers. As baby boomers age and retire, that strain will soar. Too many calories and too much sodium are chief among the dietary contributors to ill-health, disability, and premature death. Nearly two-thirds of Canadians are overweight and the lifetime risk of having hypertension is 90%.

Studies show that consumers and even trained dietitians cannot accurately estimate the amounts of these nutrients in processed foods. Yet menus describing the \$60 billion in foods sold annually at restaurants are exempt from regulations passed nearly a decade ago to mandate their disclosure on prepackaged foods.

Since 2007, New York City, the State of California, and several other U.S. jurisdictions have passed laws requiring at least calorie labelling on menus of U.S. chain restaurants. Two locales also require sodium, saturated fat, and carbohydrates on printed menus. In 2010, Congress passed a law that will mandate calorie disclosures at chain restaurants nation-wide after detailed regulations are finalized in 2012 by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

More than three dozen Canadian health groups and experts have called for menu labelling here. So far, federal and provincial governments have failed to heed that advice, but only express the non-specific prevention rhetoric ensconced in the *Canada Health Act*, the *Health Care Accord*, and other bastions of Canadian public health policy. Nutrition information voluntarily provided by the 33 large chain restaurants participating in the Canadian Restaurant and Foodservice Association's (C.R.F.A.) "Nutrition Information Program" puts the onus on customers to actively seek out brochures buried on websites or often secreted behind restaurant counters or on the bottoms of tray liners.

Drawing from nutrition brochures available on the websites of those restaurants, *Writing on the Wall* reports the two lowest-calorie and two highest-calorie menu items in 14 common food categories, including appetizers, children's menu items, and sandwiches. We also report sodium levels for low- and high-sodium foods in 11 food categories (omitting desserts, cold drinks, and hot drinks). The generally high levels of calories and sodium and the surprisingly wide range of both demonstrate the need to provide that information on menus and menu boards.

Some foods provide shockingly high amounts of calories or sodium—far more than comparable foods on the same menu (see Appendices 1 and 2). For example, in July 2011:

- Dairy Queen Cheeseburger Kids' Meal with Fries (570 calories, two meals' worth for an 8-year-old) packed nearly double the calories of the Chicken Strips Kids' Meal with Applesauce (290 calories);
- Tim Hortons Sausage, Egg, and Cheese Breakfast Sandwich had nearly double the calories (530 calories) of the English Muffin with Egg and Cheese (280 Calories);

- Pizza Hut children’s menu’s Boneless Bites with Honey BBQ Sauce contained 1,620 mg of sodium, nearly four times the sodium in the children’s Veggie Lover’s 6" Pan Pizza (430 mg);
- East Side Mario’s Hell’s Kitchen Chicken has double the sodium (3,220 mg or two whole days’ worth) as the Chicken Marsala without dipping sauce (1,640 mg); and
- McDonald’s Angus Bacon & Cheese Sandwich has nearly triple the sodium (1,990 mg) of the Big Xtra Sandwich (700 mg).

Governments must make greater efforts to help prevent diet-related disease, with one way being to enable consumers to make informed dietary choices when eating out. Improved diets can help reduce the burden of preventable disease on health care services and economic productivity. Nutrition information on restaurant menus could help health-conscious consumers choose more nutritious foods and encourage restaurants to market more healthful foods, which will improve the health of all of their customers. Hence, we recommend that local, provincial or federal governments:

**1. Require chain restaurants to disclosure on menus and menu boards, next to each food item:**

- a) the number of calories, and
- b) where applicable, symbols (such as red asterisks, \*\*) flagging foods with high or very high levels of sodium; and

mandate the placement of a brief explanation of the symbols at the bottom of the menu with a note stating: “The average adult should consume about 2,000 calories per day and about 1,500 mg of sodium per day.” which research indicates could amplify the effects of nutrient disclosures.

**2. Require that all chain restaurants provide free brochures that disclose all the nutrition information required on Nutrition Facts labels of prepackaged foods (especially saturated fat and trans fat).**

**3. Exempt small restaurant operations and short-term menu items.** Menu labelling laws should apply only to chains that have, nationally, at least \$10 million in annual sales or 10 outlets, whichever the chain is willing to provide proof of to qualify for the exemption. Smaller restaurant companies should be encouraged to voluntarily provide nutrition information. Menu items that are offered for sale fewer than 31 days of the year could be exempt.

**4. Require chain restaurants (as well as manufacturers of prepackaged foods) that are required to provide nutrition information on menus, menu boards, or labels to provide and continuously update complete nutrition and ingredient information to a publicly accessible government database.** That would facilitate restaurants’ constructive participation in the *Sodium Reduction Strategy for Canada* and other nutrition improvement areas by aiding monitoring and compliance efforts.

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