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Phone: 617-954-3976

Media@faseb.org

sprice@nutrition.org

Menu Labels Displaying Amount of Exercise Needed to Burn Calories Show Benefits

Study looks at way to reduce calorie intake

Boston, MA—More restaurants are displaying calorie information on their menus than ever before. It's not a coincidence; by law, retail food establishments that are part of a chain with twenty or more locations nationwide must disclose the calorie content of each menu item. The goal is to encourage consumers to make healthier, informed food choices. The majority of studies, however, show that providing information on calorie content does not lead to fewer calories ordered or consumed. A new angle for encouraging reduced calorie intake in these establishments would be welcome by many in the nutrition field. One currently being explored is displaying on the menu the minutes of exercise—brisk walking in this case—needed to burn food calories.

“We need a more effective strategy to encourage people to order and consume fewer calories from restaurant menus,” said Dr. Meena Shah, Texas Christian University (TCU). “Brisk walking is something nearly everyone can relate to, which is why we displayed on the menu the minutes of brisk walking needed to burn food calories,” said Ashlei James, TCU.

Shah, the senior researcher, and James, the lead researcher and graduate student, recently conducted a study of 300 men and women ages 18-30. “The group was randomly assigned to a menu without calorie labels, a menu with calorie labels, or a menu with labels for the minutes of brisk walking needed to burn the food calories,” James said. “All menus contained the same food and beverage options, which included burgers, chicken sandwiches/tenders, salad, fries, desserts, soda, and water.”

The results indicate that the menu displaying the minutes of brisk walking needed to burn food calories led to fewer calories ordered and consumed compared with the menu without calorie labels. Of note, there was no difference between the menu with calorie labels and the menu without calorie labels in the number of calories ordered and consumed by the subjects.

“This study suggests there are benefits to displaying exercise minutes to a group of young men and women. We can't generalize to a population over age 30, so we will further investigate this

in an older and more diverse group,” Shah said. “This is the first study to look at the effects of displaying minutes of brisk walking needed to burn food calories on the calories ordered and consumed.”

The study was eye-opening for many of the subjects. “For example, a female would have to walk briskly for approximately 2 hours to burn the calories in a quarter-pound double cheeseburger,” said Shah.

Results from this study will be presented orally on April 23 at the Experimental Biology 2013 meeting in Boston.

Beverley Adams-Huet, Joel Mitchell, Lyn Dart, Kelli Crisp, Marcel Turner, Mike Kasper, Jessica Bowman, Sarah Joeckel, Nicole Toomey, Heather Heefner, and Eric Blasco were coauthors on this abstract.

About Experimental Biology 2013

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