



New rules: Menus must say what's in your meal

By Carol M. Ostrom, Seattle Times health reporter, July 20, 2007

Despite objections from restaurant owners and food-industry officials, the King County Board of Health on Thursday banned artificial trans fat and required nutrition labeling for menu items in chain restaurants. With the vote, **King County joins a handful of jurisdictions in the country to ban artificial trans fats in restaurant meals and becomes only the second to require nutrition labeling on menus.**

While most restaurant owners and their supporters testified against the trans-fat ban -- most said they're already getting rid of trans fats but they simply hate mandates -- they saved their harshest words for the nutrition-labeling requirement. Chris Clifford, a Renton resident who said he's owned several restaurants in King County, said very few customers need labeling to know that a 16-ounce steak rolled in butter is fattening. "I have a six-letter word to describe them: It's 'stupid!' " Clifford told the board. "You can't help stupid people." Instead of menu labeling, Clifford suggested a "warning label" on the restaurant door: "Eating here is fattening and could kill you." On a more serious level, restaurant owners said the labeling requirement was unworkable and expensive, would possibly drive customers elsewhere -- and pleaded for more time to find a less onerous solution.

But health providers and a number of diabetic and heart patients in the standing-room-only crowd said customers deserve to have enough information to make healthful choices. Lynn Chapman of the American Diabetes Association's local chapter asked board members to imagine they were a single mother with a couple of kids. You have diabetes, and your kids are at risk, she told them. "You are stressed, you don't have time to cook," so you take the kids to a restaurant in White Center. "You need to get that [nutrition] information," she said.

Margo Wootan, nutrition policy director for the state chapter of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, urged the board not to listen to the restaurant industry's pleas. "I am deeply disappointed in the behavior of the restaurant industry here and around the country," she said. "They have done very little to provide people with the health information they need." Their "voluntary efforts," she said, have been a "dismal failure."

The nutrition-labeling rule, which takes effect Aug. 1, 2008, will require King County restaurants that are part of a chain with 10 or more outlets nationally to specify nutrition information for each item that stays on their menu for 60 days. The information must include calories, carbohydrates, fats and sodium. The requirements also will apply to wine, liquor and other beverages listed on the menu. Fast-food-chain restaurants with menu boards will be required to post calorie information on the board, with the other nutrition information available to customers.

Many restaurant owners talked about the cost of nutritional analysis and redoing menus. Lane Hoss from Anthony's Restaurants, which would be affected by the legislation because it has more than 10 restaurants in its "family," said providing nutrition information for seasonal items would be cumbersome and expensive. She said the restaurant has nine different menus, and she showed the board how nutrition information added to the large "signature menu" would transform it into an unwieldy, multipage report.

James Apa, spokesman for Public Health -- Seattle & King County, said the menu-labeling requirement will affect about 2,000 restaurants out of more than 10,000 food establishments in King County, including meal programs, fair booths and farmers markets.

Many restaurant owners said they were already getting rid of artificial trans fats in their menus, and nary a voice was raised in support of the stuff, which several health providers and nutritionists reviled as a "toxin" to human health. Trans fats have been found to raise the risk of heart disease. The **trans-fat ban takes effect May 1, 2008**, with respect to oils and shortenings used for frying or in spreads. **Restaurants get more time -- until Feb. 1, 2009 -- to eliminate trans fats used for deep frying.**

Dr. David Fleming, director and public-health officer for Public Health -- Seattle & King County, promised to work with restaurants and food-service establishments to make sure the regulations were workable. The board asked him to report back in 14 months, to make sure products without trans fats were available and the regulations were not creating an unworkable situation for restaurants. The board passed an amendment making it clear that Fleming could allow food establishments to meet the menu-labeling requirements through "substantially equivalent" methods if the rules prove too onerous in particular situations.