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Menu Changes

This past Friday the U.S. Food and Drug Administration released a proposal for listing calories on menus for restaurants, part of the Healthcare Reform Act passed last year. The goal is to have the same information available throughout the U.S. rather than the hodgepodge of regulations that a few states and cities have now. Will this have any real impact on how many calories we eat? Let me give you my experience.

In California last weekend, one of the states that have passed just such a law, I ate in one of my favorite Mexican restaurants. As I looked at the menu, I noticed that there were calories next to each food whether appetizer, entrée, or dessert. Did it affect what I ordered? You bet it did. I studied that menu for 15 minutes before I ordered. I wasn't going for the lowest calories; I could have just picked a salad without the dressing. I wanted the most nutrition for the calories I was spending.

Will this affect everyone the same way? That's the theory, but it's really hard to say. I think it's essential for everyone to have access to the information at the point of sale. I'm not saying everyone will order the low-calorie foods, but if you have the info before you make a decision, you can decide if the enjoyment and nutrition you get from the food are worth the calories it will cost. The question is how long it will be before it's something you see without paying attention to. No one knows yet.

One thing it might do is help people make better decisions. For example if you're at Burger King, and you want a Whopper with cheese, but decide to have the Big Fish with cheese because fish is probably healthier—would you change your order if you knew the Whopper had only 40 more calories than the fish? If you're going to have about 700 calories in your sandwich, you might as well get the one you want—this time. Tomorrow, maybe you should order a salad to compensate for your caloric splurge.

So what did I pick to eat? Chicken fajitas without the tortillas. At 250 calories each, tortillas were too much to spend on refined carbohydrates.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

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