

Read menu card, curb appetite

Afshan Yasmeen JANUARY 06, 2019



There is a proposal to make it mandatory for restaurants to declare calorie counts of food

If you knew that the masala dosa you are relishing contained nearly 1,030 calories, would you reach out for that second helping? A recent study has demonstrated that the brain makes “sensible food choices” when calorie information is available on the menu card.

Read and eat

The study, published in the *PLOS One*, a peer-reviewed science journal, says seeing pictures of food with calorie information not only makes food less appetising but may also change the way our brain responds to food. When food images appeared with the calorie content, the brain showed decreased activation of the reward system and increased activation in the control system.

In other words, says the study, foods that you might otherwise be inclined to eat became less desirable once the calorie content was displayed.

For the study, 42 undergraduate students at the Dartmouth University, United States, were split into dieting and non-dieting groups. For the analysis their

brain activity was measured while shown pictures of food with and without calorie information. They were then asked to rate their desire to eat the food.

The researchers observed that the self-reported desire to eat the food decreased when the subjects were shown pictures of food with calorie information.

However, nutritionists in India have mixed reactions to the applicability of this study to India. Those critical say that poor awareness about measuring calories and the “desire and longing for food” make it hard to implement in Indian restaurants

Lack of awareness

Dr. Rebecca Kuriyan Raj, Head, Nutrition and Lifestyle Clinic, St John’s Medical College Hospital, Bengaluru, says people are not aware of how many calories they are consuming every time they eat out. “Restaurant food is high in calories and most of the time, one can get more than half the requirement of the daily calories in a single meal of masala dosa, sambar and chutney, which is about 1023.7 calories,” she reckons.

Dr. Raj, was one of the authors of a multi-centre study that aimed to measure the calorie content of frequently ordered meals from sit-down and fast-food restaurants in five countries — India, Brazil, China, Finland and Ghana — and compare values with U.S. data. This study, published last month in the *British Medical Journal*, found variability in the amount of calories across restaurants because of differences in portion sizes and energy density (amount of calories for a given weight or volume).

She says, “The support of government-led initiatives to introduce mandatory calorie labelling in menus in restaurants, cafes and takeaway combined with significant efforts by the restaurants to reduce portion size, calories and sugar in the meals could help individuals to make sensible food choices.”

However, Veena Shatrugna, former Deputy Director of the Hyderabad-based National Institute of Nutrition (NIN), says calorie labelling on menu cards may not work in India given poor calorie literacy. “Even if the labelling is done, how many of us will bother to read it or keep daily counts?” she points out. “Individual response to calorie labelling is based on many factors including desire and longing for new processed foods introduced into the market every

day. It will be really difficult to standardise responses across class and caste at this stage. We need to debate these issues. We also need more research on an ideal diet for Indians, vegetarians and non-vegetarians.”

Draft regulations

But calorie-counts in restaurants are on the government’s mind. The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), a Union Health Ministry body, has issued draft packaging and labelling regulations making it mandatory for restaurant chains to declare on the menu cards, the calorie counts of all the dishes served at their outlets. It also intends to bring online food-delivery platforms and food aggregators under the ambit of these regulations.

FSSAI Chief Executive Director Pawan Kumar Agarwal says the organisation has been discussing these regulations with the restaurant-industry for over a year: “We had earlier urged restaurant companies to start printing calorie counts on their menu cards voluntarily... We are committed to enforce the rules.”

However, the Federation of Hotel and Restaurant Association of India (FHRAI) says this is not achievable in any serviced restaurant. FHRAI Vice President Gurbaxish Singh Kohli, argues that the calorie count for the same dish could vary dramatically due to various factors such as recipes and ingredients: “While the preparation of every food item changes with every chef, restaurants usually customise recipes to suit the choice of their customers,” says Kohli, who also heads the Hotels and Restaurants Association Western India. While one customer may want his food to be prepared in olive oil, the other would want an extra topping of cheese. While the thought process is good, printing calorie counts on the menu card is not achievable and the authority should modify the draft rules.