

takeaway health: how takeaway restaurants can affect your chances of a healthy diet

Jeff Alder

The NCC makes a practical difference to the lives of consumers in the UK, using its insight into consumer needs to advocate change.

We work with public service providers, businesses and regulators, and our relationship with the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform – our main funder – gives us a strong connection within government.

We conduct rigorous research and policy analysis to investigate key consumer issues, and use this to influence organisations and people that make change happen.

Check www.ncc.org.uk for our latest news.

Published by the National Consumer Council
June 2008
© National Consumer Council
PD 24/08

Design: Greg Stevenson
Editing: Katy Evans-Bush

Summary

With overweight and obesity levels rising, more and more people are at risk of diet-related disease. If people are going to change their eating habits, they need clear information about what they are eating – and they also need healthy options to be available. With the takeaway market now worth more than £8.5 billion in the UK¹, it is clear that consumers need healthy food choices to be available in a range of settings, including their local takeaway restaurant.

We have looked at the nutrition information in seven major chain takeaway restaurants to find out how easy it is to make these healthier choices. We found that, though nutrition information is available in some of them, it was often hard to find and difficult to understand. We asked people if they would find nutrition information useful in takeaway restaurants; 60 per cent of those we asked said that yes, they would use this information to pick healthier choices.

We also looked at the nutrition content of meals and found that they were often high in salt, saturated fat and sugar – making it harder even for people who are trying to eat healthier food.

Key recommendations

NCC is calling on:

- ▶ takeaway restaurants to make clear, effective and easy-to-understand nutritional information available to people before they choose their food;
- ▶ takeaway restaurants to make sure that there are healthier options across their range of products; and
- ▶ the Food Standards Agency (FSA) to provide guidance on the best form for this nutrition information to take.

¹ UK fast food and home delivery market report. Key note 2006

Healthy choices, simple messages

With more of the nation's food being eaten outside the home, many people are unaware of what they are really putting in their mouths. Without easy-to-use nutrition information, it's almost impossible for consumers to control their intake of ingredients that can make a difference to health and obesity levels – including salt, saturated fat and sugar.

This investigation focuses on two related issues:

- ▶ providing healthier choices at takeaway restaurants; and
- ▶ the importance of clear and easy-to-use healthy option messaging.

If we agree that consumers need to make informed choices about what they eat, then we agree that they need easy access to some form of nutrition information. Supermarkets are already working to help consumers make informed choices – healthy option ranges and front-of-pack signpost labelling show fat, saturated fat, salt and sugar levels at-a-glance. Similar information in takeaway restaurants would underline the message that it is important to watch what you eat wherever you are.

What we did

We visited outlets in London in May 2008 to see what nutrition information was provided in-store on leaflets, packaging, food trays, menus and menu boards. If we found no information we asked staff for help. We looked at McDonalds, Burger King, KFC, Pizza Hut, Dominos Pizza, Pizza Express and Wimpy: all branches of restaurant chains with over 100 outlets.

We also checked company websites and in-store leaflets (where they were available) for the nutritional quality of a selection of meals, to see if there were healthier choices available and if there was appropriate information on hand to help people make those choices.

We also conducted a survey of over 1,000 consumers to see:

- ▶ if they would expect to find healthier options at takeaway restaurants;
- ▶ whether they would use nutrition information if it were made available; and
- ▶ how likely or unlikely it was that they would use this information to pick healthier takeaway meals.

A representative sample of over 1,000 people were interviewed at home, throughout England, Scotland and Wales from 28 May to 1 June 2008.

What we found

Consumers would use information

We commissioned TNS to find out if consumers would find nutritional information useful in major takeaway restaurants and, if so, whether they would use this information to pick healthier choices.

We found that people generally expect to find healthy options in chain restaurants, and most would find clear nutrition labelling useful. More than half of those we asked said they would use the information to pick healthier options.

Of the nearly three quarters (72 per cent) who said they would find clear nutritional information useful:

- ▶ 61 per cent of respondents would be likely (34 per cent very likely, 27 per cent fairly likely) to use nutritional information to help pick healthier choices;
- ▶ women (65 per cent) would be more likely than men (57 per cent) to do so; and
- ▶ younger people (aged 16-24: 68 per cent) rather than older ones (age 65+: 47 per cent) would be more likely to.

Nutrition information on display

We found that at some of the takeaway restaurants, there was no nutrition information on display. And none of the information we did find allowed the consumer to compare relative healthiness of food choices at a glance.

Some restaurants offered detailed nutrition information on leaflets at the counter, on external packaging, or lining the base of food trays. However, information on food trays is only available after buying the food – so it is no help in making a decision.

Overall we found the information (when provided) difficult to find and hard to understand; it didn't sufficiently inform consumers to help them make a healthier choice.

Nutrition information available in stores

Company	In-store nutrition information	Information on calories, salt, fat and sugar levels on company website	At-a-glance, easy-to-use nutrition information on menus or menu boards (before purchase)
KFC	Yes, detailed information on the back of tray liners	Yes	No; detailed information provided in tray liners after purchase, or on request.
Wimpy	None	Yes	None
McDonalds	Yes, detailed information on the back of tray liners	Yes	No; detailed information provided in tray liners after purchase, or on request
Burger King	Yes, detailed leaflet at counter	Yes	No; but detailed information provided on leaflet, before purchase
Pizza Express	None	No	None
Pizza Hut	None	Yes	None
Domino Pizza	None	Yes	None

Healthier options available

Our research suggests that, even with nutrition information to hand, customers in some of the restaurants we surveyed would find it hard to choose a meal with less than half the recommended guideline daily amounts (GDAs) of salt, saturated fat and sugar.

We found some meals contained nearly the recommended amounts for the entire day. For example, a KFC meal of a tower burger, regular BBQ beans, yoghurt and cola would provide 97 per cent of the GDA of salt and 69 per cent of the sugar GDA.

We did find some healthier meal options however: a McDonalds meal of McChicken sandwich, garden salad, tea and apple pie would give less than a third of the GDA of salt, saturated fat and sugar.

We also found that, without good nutrition information, consumers looking to keep their salt intake low, for instance, might be shocked at the high saturated fat levels in their food. For example, a Burger King Whopper has less than 1g salt but has 9g saturated fat – almost a third of the GDA for a grown man.

But how much are takeaway consumers eating? The amount of salt, saturated fat and sugar in a meal depends on portion sizes. This may sound obvious – but although it is clear for a burger, for example, it is not so simple in the case of pizzas. For this reason we looked at the relative healthiness per 100g of each food, and found that, based on the Food Standards Authority's (FSA's) front-of-pack traffic light system², most 100g portions of burgers and pizzas are medium to high (amber to red) in their salt, sugar and saturated fat content.

² According to the FSA's traffic light system, red means a food has high levels of something we should be trying to cut down on: stop. Amber means it isn't particularly high or low but that we should use caution. Green means the food is low in the things we should be cutting down on: go ahead!

Comparison of healthier and typical meal options at takeaway restaurants

Healthier meal options

	McDonalds meal of: McChicken Sandwich Garden side salad Apple pie Tea		KFC meal of: Drumstick and breast Regular fries MunchBunch raspberry yoghurt Regular diet cola		Guideline Daily Amounts (GDAs) for adult women
	% of GDA		% of GDA		
Calories	640	32	764	38	2000kcal
Saturated fat	5	25	8.8	44	20g
Sugar	19	21	13.7	15	90g
Salt	1.8	30	2.8	47	6g

Typical meal options

	McDonalds meal of: Quarterpounder with cheese Medium fries Medium vanilla milkshake Chocolate chip muffin		KFC meal of: Tower burger Regular BBQ beans MunchBunch raspberry yoghurt Regular cola		Guideline Daily Amounts (GDAs) for adult women
	% of GDA		% of GDA		
Calories	1745	87	919	46	2000kcal
Saturated fat	25	125	8.1	41	20g
Sugar	114	127	61.8	69	90g
Salt	4.7	78	5.8	97	6g

Relative healthiness of meal products per 100g

Salt levels

	Healthier salt option	g per 100g	Colour coding*	Less healthy salt option	g per 100g	Colour coding*
MacDonalds	McChicken Sandwich	0.8	Amber	Double cheeseburger	1.3	Amber
Pizza Hut	Vegetable Supreme large pan	0.8	Amber	Italian Meat Feast medium	2.1	Red
Dominos	Vegetarian Supreme medium	0.9	Amber	American Hot	1.9	Red

Saturated fat levels

	Healthier salt option	g per 100g	Colour coding*	Less healthy salt option	g per 100g	Colour coding*
Burger King	Chicken Royale burger	1.43	Green	Whopper burger	3.28	Amber
Wimpy	Spicy Bean burger	2.0	Amber	Classic King Size burger	6.3	Red
Dominos	Vegetarian Supreme	1.7	Amber	American Hot	3.8	Amber

Energy kcals

	Healthier salt option	g per 100g	Less healthy salt option	g per 100g
Wimpy	Leanburger	165	Hamburger	266
Pizza Hut	Chicken Supreme medium pan	227	Pepperoni feast medium pan	302
Dominos	Vegetarian Supreme medium	172	American Hot	241

*Note: colour coding by the FSA front-of-pack nutrition labelling scheme by 100g only not per portion

What we would like to see

The reality of how people eat has changed. If we are going to beat the rise of obesity and its attendant health problems, takeaway restaurants must be part of the solution. Alongside the nutrition information and signposting, we want to see more options on their menus with lower saturated fat, salt and sugar content, and less salt, saturated fat and sugar in their existing products. This kind of ‘choice-editing’ takes the burden for responsible choices off the consumer, by eliminating some of the opportunities to make less healthy choices and by making healthier choices the norm.

The healthyliving award

In Scotland, the healthyliving award is working with all caterers to make it easier for customers across Scotland to eat healthily when eating out. Funded by the Scottish Government and delivered by the Scottish Consumer Council, the award uses a simple green apple logo to highlight healthier options on menus, which are prepared using healthier ingredients and cooking methods, to help customers to make informed choices. This is an excellent example of how eating establishments can help to make healthy choices easier for consumers.

Healthy Options Award – Wales

The aim of the Healthy Options Award is to make it easier for consumers to make the healthy choice when eating out. Aimed at food outlets across Wales, the scheme grades establishments for offering healthier alternatives to the standard menu, including low salt and low saturated fat options. It is only applicable to businesses in possession of a food hygiene award.

Food premises that make the mark can display a Healthy Options Award logo giving consumers a quick way of knowing where they can access healthy food.

The award is supported by the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health and FSA Wales.

We also want to see nutrition information or healthy eating symbols displayed on menu boards or menus, to help people make up their minds about what to eat. This information needs to be easy to understand, so that all customers, including children, can make use of it. For example, the information could use some kind of universal symbols to indicate calorie content and saturated fat, salt and sugar levels. Simple signposting should clearly show more healthy and less healthy options, consistent with current dietary guidelines.

Conclusions and recommendations

NCC welcomes the government announcement, in *Healthy weight, healthy lives: a cross-government strategy for England*, of a healthy food code of practice which challenges industry to provide information on the nutritional content of food in a wide range of settings – including restaurants and takeaways.

Takeaway restaurants can play a big part in helping their customers to eat healthier foods – both by ‘choice-editing’ through developing the content of their menus, and also by displaying clear, easy-to-read nutrition information on menus or menu boards. Our survey suggests that a significant proportion of consumers would value this information, and would use it to pick healthy choices.

Key recommendations

NCC is calling on:

- ▶ takeaway restaurants to make clear, effective and easy-to-understand nutritional information available to people before they choose their food;
- ▶ takeaway restaurants to make sure that there are healthier options across their range of products; and
- ▶ the Food Standards Agency (FSA) to provide guidance on the best form for this nutrition information to take.