

Poll: Picking healthy restaurant foods not so easy

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LOS ANGELES, California (Reuters) -- Picking the healthiest item on a restaurant menu is not as easy as it seems, according to a new poll that found most respondents were unable to identify the dishes lowest in calories, salt and fat.

In the poll, which was commissioned by the California Center for Public Health Advocacy, 523 respondents were given a choice of four menu items from popular restaurant chains and asked to select which were lowest in fat, calories and salt.

The first question asked people to choose which Denny's dish was lowest in calories: a ham and cheddar omelet, country fried steak and eggs, three slices of French toast with syrup and margarine, or three pancakes with syrup and margarine.

The answer? Country fried steak and eggs.

The poll's three other questions asked respondents to make similar choices about menu items from Chili's and Macaroni Grill, both units of Dallas, Texas-based Brinker International Inc., and from No. 1 restaurant chain McDonald's.

None of the respondents answered all four questions correctly, and 68 percent failed all of them. Less than 1 percent answered three of four questions correctly, and education and income levels had no impact, the CCPHA said.

The CCPHA said the poll's results contrast with the restaurant industry's claims that eateries "offer plenty of healthy choices and people just need to order better."

"I have a doctorate in public health, and I failed this quiz," Dr. Harold Goldstein, executive director of the CCPHA, said. "Common sense does not help ... who would think that a large chocolate shake at McDonald's has more calories than two Big Macs?"

In recent years, many chains, including Denny's and McDonald's, have voluntarily posted the nutritional information of their foods online or in their restaurants.

Those moves came as restaurant chains faced increasing criticism from health advocates and others for contributing to the prevalence of obesity among U.S. adults and children.

Eighty-four percent of the CCPHA poll's respondents supported requiring restaurant chains to post nutritional information.

About two-thirds of U.S. adults and 17 percent of children and adolescents are considered to be overweight or obese, according to federal health officials.

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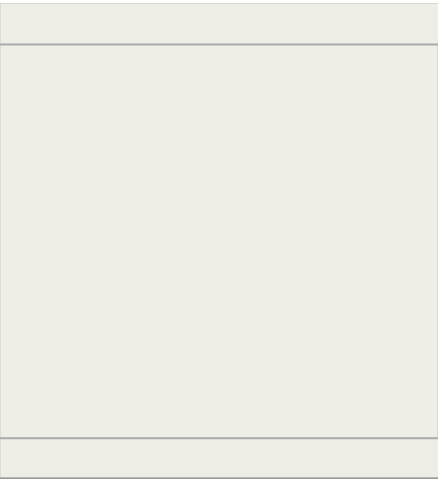
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