

POLICY BRIEF

SUMMARY

Poor diets and high body mass index are now the two greatest risk factors contributing to the burden of disease in Australia, ranking ahead of smoking.¹ High levels of fast food consumption contribute significantly to poor overall dietary habits, which is extremely concerning as 63.4% of Australian adults and 27.4% of children are overweight or obese. This places a large proportion of the population at heightened risk of developing chronic diseases including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and some cancers.²

Despite these figures, the approaches of Australian State governments to placing energy in kilojoules on chain fast food store menus vary. Tasmania, Western Australia and the Northern Territory are yet to implement any measures to appropriately inform consumers about the energy content of products at the point of sale in fast food outlets.

There is a pressing need in these jurisdictions to regulate for mandatory kilojoule menu labelling in chain fast food outlets. The New South Wales system, in place since 2011, has proved effective at informing consumers and leading to a reduction in the energy content of products purchased. It provides a good model and presents an opportunity for other States to adopt a nationally consistent approach.

This policy brief provides an overview of:

1. The dietary habits of Australians and the contribution of poor diet to high rates of overweight, obesity and diet-related diseases;
2. Evidence of the impact of clear chain fast food menu labelling on diet, both in Australia and internationally;

MENU KILOJOULE LABELLING IN CHAIN FOOD OUTLETS IN AUSTRALIA

3. Legislative actions undertaken in New South Wales, Victoria and other states, and the positive impacts highlighted by recent evaluation.

CONSUMPTION OF FAST FOOD AND CHRONIC DISEASE IN AUSTRALIA

Australia's high rates of chronic disease reflect overall poor dietary profiles. Survey data from 2014 has shown that 81% of Australians will eat out at least once a month, with more than half of those visiting a fast food chain (or Quick Service Restaurant).³ Australians' patronage of fast food chains has been found to equate to 51 million visits per month.⁴

The most popular fast food brand was McDonalds, visited by 42% of Australian's over the four week period surveyed, followed by Subway (29%), KFC (23%), Hungry Jacks (16%) and Domino's Pizza (11%).⁵ Young males, in particular are big consumers of soft drink, burgers and chips.⁶ Data from the National Health Survey 2014–15 has also shown that less than 10% of Australian adults, and 5.4% of children, met the recommended 5 serves of vegetables per day, with fruit consumption also generally falling short of recommended serves.⁷

Food products served at chain fast food outlets, and other pre-prepared convenience foods, are commonly high in saturated fats, sugar and salt, and are often energy dense.⁸ Consumption of energy-dense, nutrient poor foods is associated with excess overall energy intake, higher body mass index, and a range of negative health outcomes. Fast food meals and snacks are often sold in large serving sizes, and are packaged or 'bundled' to encourage the purchasing of multiple items in 'value meals'.

WHAT IMPACT DOES MENU LABELLING HAVE ON FOOD CHOICES?

Research in Australia as well as internationally shows that people are likely to substantially underestimate the energy content of restaurant food,⁹ and that many people do not have a good understanding of their daily energy requirements.¹⁰ However, it is also now well established that appropriately-designed kilojoule labelling at the point of sale can effectively inform consumers about their energy requirements and the energy content of products, and can lead to a significant reduction in the energy content of meals purchased.

In 2010 the NSW Parliament passed legislation requiring energy in kilojoules to be listed on menus in certain chain fast food outlets. As well as providing clear information about the energy content of the products at the point of sale, the scheme also required the prominent display of information regarding average daily adult energy requirements (8,700 kilojoules). The NSW Government also developed its 8700 website¹¹ to inform consumers about their daily kilojoule requirements, the kilojoule content of a range of foods (including fast food) and the new legislation. Evaluation of this initiative was completed in 2013 and showed that the display of information, together with supporting public education, resulted in a significant decrease of the median kilojoules purchased during the evaluation period, with an overall reduction of 519 kilojoules, equivalent to a 15% decrease.¹²

The findings of the New South Wales evaluation are consistent with research conducted in 2012 by the Cancer Council Victoria,¹³ which examined the influence of different nutrition menu labelling models on fast food choices for an evening meal.

The study surveyed 1,294 adults and revealed that the provision of kilojoule information was an effective means of encouraging people to choose meals with lower mean kilojoule content. Respondents presented with no nutrition information purchased meals with the highest mean kilojoule content of all participants.¹⁴

There is also a strong body of international research supporting implementation of energy information as a

means of empowering consumers to make healthier choices. Survey evidence has shown that the provision of calorie information on fast food menus in New York City resulted in customers purchasing food with fewer calories.¹⁵ The research compared behaviour before and after the introduction of calorie information on fast food menus and found that customers who reported using calorie information purchased around 430 fewer kilojoules than customers who did not see or use the calorie information.¹⁶ Other US research has found that people given nutritional information in restaurants are 24–37% less likely to choose high-calorie dishes.¹⁷

LEGISLATIVE ACTION AND POSITIVE RESULTS SO FAR

In January 2011, the National Review of Food Labelling Law and Policy recommended the introduction of national mandatory requirements for declaration of the kilojoule content of standard products on food chain menus and menu boards, and on vending machines.¹⁸ The Review also recommended that food chains should be encouraged to display multiple traffic light labels on menus and menu boards for all standard products, and should be required to display traffic light labels for any food product that displays a health claim. The Food Regulation Standing Committee subsequently developed guidelines to assist jurisdictions to develop nationally consistent kilojoule labelling on menus.¹⁹

The New South Wales menu labelling scheme implemented through the *Food Amendment Act 2011*, was the first legislative scheme in Australia to require certain retail food outlets to display nutrition information on menus at point-of-sale, to assist consumers to make healthy choices.

The laws took effect in February 2011 and apply to all chain fast food outlets with more than 20 outlets operating in the state, or more than 50 nationally.

Since then, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory have introduced mandatory kilojoule labelling schemes to inform consumers in certain chain food outlets. Though broadly similar, the Australian Capital Territory scheme applies to chain food outlets with more than 7 stores in the territory or 50 nationally.²⁰ This will ensure the scheme is consistently



applied across large chain food outlets offering similar standardised food items.

The Victorian Government passed legislation²¹ in February 2017 which will come into operation in May 2018. In contrast to schemes in place in New South Wales and South Australia, the Victorian scheme will also apply to large chain food businesses that offer dine-in only. In addition, the Victorian scheme will not apply to small chain food businesses (those with less than 50 outlets nationally and less than 20 outlets in Victoria) that choose to voluntarily display kilojoule information on their menus, menu boards and food tags.

The legislative schemes all set out detailed requirements including that chain food outlets must display the kilojoule content of each standard menu item on all menus, drive through menu boards, and tags and labels, that display the name or price of menu items.²² There are also elements to ensure the information is presented prominently, clearly and in a consistent style.

PUBLIC OPINION

There is strong public support for the display of nutrition information in fast food outlets. A recent Cancer Council and Heart Foundation survey found that more than eight in ten consumers surveyed want kilojoule information in fast food and snack chains.²³

More than half (52%) of consumers surveyed²⁴ said they weren't sure how many kilojoules were in the foods and drinks they purchased from fast food and snack chains.

POLICY ACTION NEEDED

1. Implementation of mandatory kilojoule labelling in chain food outlets in Western Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory to ensure that consumers are adequately informed about the nutritional content of chain fast food.
2. Supportive, targeted public education to raise community awareness about dietary energy requirements to ensure the provision of kilojoule information is understood throughout Australia.
3. Cooperation between State Governments to maximise consistency between state-based schemes.

About the Obesity Policy Coalition

The Obesity Policy Coalition (OPC) is a partnership between the Cancer Council of Victoria, Diabetes Victoria and the Global Obesity Centre at Deakin University, a World Health Organisation Collaborating Centre for Obesity, with support from VicHealth. The OPC advocates for evidence-based policy interventions and research to address the high rates of overweight and obesity in Australia, particularly in children.

Contact us

Obesity Policy Coalition
615 St Kilda Road
Melbourne, Victoria, Australia 3004

Phone (03) 9514 6100
Fax (03) 9514 6800
Website: www.opc.org.au
Email: opc@opc.org.au



[@opcaustralia](https://twitter.com/opcaustralia)



facebook.com/ObesityPolicyCoalition



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³ Sophie Langley, 'Australian fast food 'emma' survey findings released, March 17, 2014, Australian Food News <http://ausfoodnews.com.au/2014/03/17/australian-fast-food-%E2%80%98emma%E2%80%99-survey-findings-released.html>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Health Survey: Nutrition First Results – Foods and Nutrients 2011-2012.

⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Health Survey: First Results, 2014-15 available at <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/4364.0.55.001~2014-15-Main%20Features~Daily%20intake%20of%20fruit%20and%20vegetables~28>

⁸ National Health and Medical Research Council 2013, *Australian Dietary Guidelines*. Canberra: National Health and Medical Research Council, https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/files_nhmrc/publications/attachments/n55_australian_dietary_guidelines_130530.pdf

⁹ Wansink B, Chandon P. Meal size, not body size, explains errors in estimating the calorie content of meals. *Ann Int Med* 2006; 145: 326-332; Burton S, Creyer EH, Kees J, Huggins K. Attacking the obesity epidemic: the potential health benefits of providing nutrition information in restaurants. *Am J Pub Health* 2006; 96: 1669-1675.

¹⁰ ABC News, 18 June 2014 'Kilojoule labelling of fast food: Most people wrong about their daily needs, survey finds' <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-06-18/kilojoule-labelling-of-fast-food-most-people-wrong/5532716>.

¹¹ New South Wales Government www.8700.com.au

¹² New South Wales Government, Food Authority (2013) *Evaluation of kilojoule Menu Labelling* CP070/1308

¹³ B Morley et al (2013) "What types of nutrition menu labelling lead consumers to select less energy-dense fast food? An experimental study." *Appetite*, 67: 8-15

¹⁴ B Morley et al (2013) "What types of nutrition menu labelling lead consumers to select less energy-dense fast food? An experimental study" 67 *Appetite* 8-15

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¹⁸ Review Panel. Labelling logic: review of food labelling law and policy. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia. 2011.

¹⁹ Department of Health and Ageing (2012). "Principles for Introducing Point-Of-Sale Nutrition Information at Standard Food Outlets".

²⁰ Australian Capital Territory Government, Department of Health, information on Kilojoule Display Scheme, see

<http://health.act.gov.au/health-services/population-health/health-protection-service/food-safety/kilojoule-displays/>

²¹ Food Amendment (Kilojoule Labelling Scheme and Other Matters) Act 2016)

²² See Food Regulation 2010 (NSW), Part 2B; Food Variation Regulations 2012 (SA), Part 2; Food (Nutrition Information) Amendment Act 2011 (ACT), Parts 2 and 3.

²³ Heart Foundation and Cancer Council Victoria survey of 1,000 Victorians aged 25-49 conducted in April 2015.

²⁴ Heart Foundation and Cancer Council Victoria survey of 558 Victorians aged 25-49 conducted in July 2016.