

Study targets sodium in restaurant food

May 11th, 2009 @ 9:00am

By Mary Richards

WASHINGTON D.C. -- A new report shows a ridiculous amount of salt in restaurant food. It says some restaurant chains serve meals that contain enough sodium for four and a half days.

Restaurants say they offer healthy choices and try to keep customers informed.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest report spotlights some of the saltiest restaurant and fast food meals in the country.

Michael Jacobson, CSPI'S executive director, told ABC News what he learned. "Salt, salt, salt. If the meal was high in fat, it was high in salt. If it was low in fat, it was high in salt. It's Salt City at restaurants," he said.

Jacobson says big portions are dangerous. "Some of the large meals at places like Denny's and Chili's Grill and Bar, the means have a whole day's worth of calories and two to four days worth of salt," he said.

He says these restaurants are actually promoting disease. "Salt is probably the single most harmful ingredient in the food supply because it boosts blood pressure, which causes heart attacks and strokes," he said.

He says the restaurants could easily drop the salt. "They can easily cut down on some of the salt without losing any of the taste," he said.

Jacobson says the report shows eating at home is your most healthy option. The CSPI found that a typical frozen dinner has about one-third less sodium than meals at restaurants.

The nonprofit watchdog group is renewing its call for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to lower sodium levels in food. It wants a new law requiring restaurants to print the salt content on the menu or a handy paper. Right now, many chains list the salt content of meals only on their Web sites. **Examples of sodium content from CSPI**

- Red Lobster Admirals' Feast with Caesar Salad, Creamy Lobster Topped Mashed Potato, Cheddar Bay Biscuit, and a Lemonade: 7,106 mg
- Chili's Buffalo Chicken Fajitas (with tortillas and condiments) and a Dr Pepper: 6,916 mg
- Chili's Honey-Chipotle Ribs with Mashed Potatoes with Gravy, Seasonal Vegetables, and a Dr. Pepper: 6,440 mg
- Olive Garden Tour of Italy (lasagna) with a Breadstick, Garden Fresh Salad with House Dressing, and a Coca-Cola: 6,176 mg

- Olive Garden Chicken Parmigiana with a Breadstick, Garden Fresh Salad with House Dressing, and Raspberry Lemonade: 5,735 mg

Restaurant response

Restaurants that made the list say they work hard to keep customers informed and offer healthy choices.



Red Lobster, for instance, posts nutritional content for all of its meals on its Web site, redlobster.com, and in its restaurants. An online calculator lets customers add up what they're consuming in a full meal.

"Red Lobster offers many options for those watching their sodium intake, including up to eight species of fresh fish in each restaurant and a Lighthouse menu with selections less than 500 calories and 750mg of sodium," Red Lobster's communications director Mark Jaronski said in a statement.

At CSPI, Jacobson credited restaurants like KFC, Burger King and Pizza Hut for starting to cut back on salty choices.