

Informed Dining 

Informed Dining Program Evaluation

Executive Summary

March 2016



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Informed Dining program (the program) is a voluntary nutrition information program for restaurants in Canada that have at least one outlet located in BC.

The purpose of the program is to improve the health of British Columbians by helping consumers make informed food choices when dining out, thereby contributing to the promotion of healthy weights and reducing the risk of chronic disease. Participating restaurants promote the availability of nutrition information and provide their guests with nutrition information for all of their standard menu items. Participating restaurants are required to display the program logo and directional statement on their menu or menu board advising guests that nutrition information is available upon request at or before the point of ordering in a manner prescribed by the program.



The program was developed by the Province of BC in collaboration with Restaurants Canada, the BC Restaurant and Foodservices Association and the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada (BC & Yukon) and launched in 2012. As of June 30, 2015, over 2,000 restaurant outlets in BC are participating in the program (15%¹ of all restaurant outlets in BC) and over 11,000 nationally.

A preliminary evaluation was completed in 2013 when approximately 300 restaurant outlets in BC were participating. In 2014, 22 national chain restaurant brands committed to participate in the program. This most recent evaluation examines the impact of the program one year after the 22 chains implemented Informed Dining in their outlets. This evaluation is intended to gain a better understanding of how the program is functioning and the impact of the national chain restaurant participation.

DATA COLLECTION

The Ministry of Health and the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada (BC & Yukon) collected both process and outcome data through a wide variety of methods:

Consumer surveys and public opinion research

Two web-based surveys were conducted in November 2014 and June 2015 with BC residents who had visited at least one participating restaurant outlet in the past three months. A web-based quantitative survey was also conducted with 875 British Columbians in March 2015 to gauge public interest, program awareness and support for nutrition information in restaurants.

Focus groups and mystery diners

Six focus groups (42 participants) with frequent restaurant visitors were carried out in Vancouver and Victoria between June 18 and July 7, 2015. Participants were required to visit one of six participating restaurants, complete a short questionnaire and an exercise with nutrition menus, and attend a discussion group session. In addition, 201 mystery visits were conducted between June 19 and July 16, 2015 at participating restaurants located throughout BC.

Plain language expert assessment

A plain language expert reviewed nutrition menus from six participating restaurants and analyzed them for readability and ease of navigation.

Restaurant survey and stakeholder interviews

A web-based survey was completed anonymously by 10 restaurant operators (20% of the total number of restaurant brands) between June 24 and July 16, 2015. The survey was intended to gain an understanding of the restaurants' experience with the program. In addition, members of the Provincial Advisory Committee, the Regional Directors' Health Protection Council and 20 participating restaurant operators were interviewed in February 2015.

Restaurant verification reports, program documentation review and web analytics

Environmental Health Officers monitor restaurant compliance with program requirements as part of their routine food safety visits. As of June 30, 2015, 440 verifications had been completed on 41 of the 63 restaurant brands. In addition, the evaluation reviewed and analyzed Ministry of Health program files related to the development, administration and monitoring of the program. Finally, web analytics collected since 2011 were reviewed.

Short surveys

As part of the promotion plan to raise awareness of the program, Informed Dining representatives had information booths at two consumer health shows and at two health professional conferences between January and June 2015. A short survey (2-3 questions) assessed public awareness of the program prior to visiting the booth and consumers desire to have nutrition information available in restaurants.

Over 2,000 restaurant outlets in BC are participating in the Informed Dining program.

KEY FINDINGS

Findings are presented in terms of four key elements for program success:

1. Program participation and participant satisfaction
2. Participant compliance, visibility and consumer awareness
3. Consumer access to and use of nutrition information
4. Readability and comprehension of nutrition information

Key Finding 1: Program participation and participant satisfaction

Participation by restaurants in the Informed Dining program has increased substantially since the last evaluation, due almost exclusively to greater participation in the program by chain restaurants. Forty-five percent of chain restaurant outlets in BC (2,013) are now participating in the program. Independent restaurant operators and public institutions represent about 3% of participating restaurants. Overall, participation by BC restaurants is at 15% (2,070). Restaurant participants are generally satisfied with the supports they receive for program implementation.

Despite high compliance with program standards, consumers have difficulty seeing the program logo and directional statement.

Key Finding 2: Participant compliance, visibility and consumer awareness

Overall, restaurants are complying with current program standards regarding logo and directional statement presentation. However, consumers have difficulty seeing the logo and directional statement. This could be a result of poor placement of the materials and/or competing displays and distractions in the restaurant environment. With 1 in 10 British Columbians aware of Informed Dining, consumer awareness of the program remains unchanged since 2013.

Approximately 70% of consumers were unable to locate the nutrition information without asking for assistance.

Key Finding 3: Consumer access to and use of nutrition information

Most consumers prefer to have nutrition information available without having to ask for it, and at least half of restaurants who responded to the survey indicated that their nutrition information is available for consumers to access without asking. Regardless, less than one-third of consumers were able to locate the information without asking staff. The majority of staff were aware of the program and could provide a basic description of Informed Dining.

Over three-quarters of those consumers who reported reading nutrition information also reported using the information, primarily for making their menu selection that day or in the future. Additionally, the information was sometimes used later in the day to choose smaller portions for other meals, or avoid unhealthy foods.

Key Findings 4: Readability and comprehension of nutrition information

Most consumers who reported using the nutrition information found it easy to use and, in a controlled setting, consumers were able to interpret it correctly. This finding was inconsistent with the review of program materials by a plain language expert. This discrepancy is likely due to the fact that respondents reported high levels of education (predominantly post-secondary). Regardless of education level, it took six to twelve minutes to find the information to answer simple questions, suggesting that the length of time to read and understand the information would be a deterrent to using it, particularly in a quick-service environment.

The amount of time required to read and comprehend the information may prevent consumer use of the program.

CONCLUSION

Participation by restaurants in the Informed Dining program has increased significantly since 2013, due primarily to 22 national chains joining the program in 2014. The program is now offered in 15% of all restaurant outlets in the province, and almost half of all chain restaurants now participate in the program. While greater participation by restaurants in the program is encouraging, the program's success is ultimately dependent on consumer awareness of the program, and the consumers' ability to access and use the nutrition information provided through this program.

There continues to be a lack of awareness of the program by the public generally and by consumers when dining in restaurants offering the program. Access to the nutrition information also continues to be a challenge, with most consumers having to ask for the information, even though they would prefer to receive it automatically. When consumers do read and use the nutrition information, the majority of them use it to make an informed dining choice.