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Evaluation of Restaurant Menus to Determine the Availability of Healthy Food Options and Guide Community Transformation Grant Activities in Massachusetts

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INTRODUCTION. The availability of healthy menu options in restaurants is an important factor in the prevention of obesity. The Mass in Motion Initiative and two Community Transformation Grant (CTG) projects are conducting statewide longitudinal surveys to determine the availability of healthy food in restaurants in the state of Massachusetts.

METHODS. The Community Nutrition Environment Evaluation Data System-Restaurant (C-NEEDS-R) was developed for food environment surveillance. C-NEEDS-R takes into account seasonal and geographic variations in food supplies, cultural relevance, and USDA dietary recommendations. Between summer 2012 and winter 2013, 506 restaurants in 36 Massachusetts towns and cities were surveyed and analyzed. Through menu and site evaluation, the availability of healthy entrees was examined for each restaurant, and the total number of healthy entrees as well as the percent of healthy entrees was calculated for each restaurant. For each municipality, the average number and average percentage of healthy entrees for restaurants within the community was also calculated.

RESULTS. The surveyed restaurants had average 3.2 healthy entrees on the menu, accounting for 13.4% of the total number of entrees available. The percentage of healthy options varied widely by restaurant and restaurant type, ranging from 0 to 84%, and only 15 of the 506 surveyed restaurants (<3%) had 50% or more of the entrees designated as healthy. The percentage of healthy entrees also varied extensively by community, ranging from 5% to 30%.

DISCUSSION. As noted, menu evaluation demonstrated that the large majority of the surveyed restaurants had few healthy entrees, indicating a need to increase availability of healthy options. Analysis of restaurant- and community-level variations in availability is useful for CTG programs to formulate and prioritize interventions. Future longitudinal surveys of food stores in the intervention and control communities will help evaluate the effectiveness of CTG interventions.

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