

# Nutrient Content Claims: What Restaurants Need to Know

## What is a nutrient content claim?

A nutrient content claim is a statement about a food that characterizes a level of a nutrient in that food. Some examples include “reduced fat,” “contains 200 calories,” “no trans fat,” and “low sodium.”

## Why are nutrient content claims important to restaurants?

Health-conscious consumers often select restaurants, as well as items from a given menu, based on the healthfulness of the options. Restaurants can stand to benefit from this selectivity by qualifying the menu items (as low fat, low sodium, etc.), and to assist customers in making appropriate choices. The FDA has compiled standardized guidelines describing what restaurants can and cannot say about their meals.

## Do folks really look for nutrient content claims on a menu?

Absolutely. In fact, studies have revealed that when a food item features a claim, consumers view the food as healthier and are more likely to purchase it. And because people who follow strict dietary regimens to manage a health condition still enjoy dining out, they appreciate full disclosure regarding their food choices.

## What are some things restaurants need to keep in mind regarding claims?

- If a nutrient content claim is made for a menu item, the nutrition information (relevant to that claim) must be publicly available for that menu item.
- A claim that is inconsistent with the target item’s nutrition information diminishes the credibility of the restaurant. Claims that cannot be substantiated, or are perceived as questionable because of context, can damage a restaurant’s reputation. Thus a nutrition expert should review claims for accuracy.
- If a restaurant violates the FDA regulations for acceptable use of nutrient content claims, the restaurant may be fined. An example of a violation is to claim “Made with low-fat cheese” for a pizza that, as a whole, does not meet the requirements for “low fat” or “reduced fat” when compared to a similar product.

## Which nutrient content claims can be legally used on restaurant menus?

There are many other nutrient content claims available for use. Here are a few examples with definitions:

**Low Calorie:** 120 calories or less per 100 grams of the menu item

**Low Fat:** 3 grams or less per 100 grams of the menu item and 30% of calories from fat or less

**High Fiber:** 20% or more of the Daily Value for the menu item

**Sugar Free:** less than 0.5 grams per serving of the menu item

**Low Sodium:** 140 milligrams or less per 100 grams of the menu item

## How do we determine which menu items fit a particular nutrient content claim?

The FDA has outlined its guidelines and regulations in the Federal Registry and other documents, which are available online. Because a comprehensive understanding of nutrition, nutrition analysis, and labeling laws is necessary to implement such claims, consulting with a registered dietitian specializing in food labeling is the best approach to determine which nutrient content claims you can and should use.

**Wendy Hess, RD, CDE** is a consultant to the restaurant industry, offering recipe nutrient analysis, food labeling compliance, menu consulting, food allergy training, and an Interactive Nutrition Calculator for your website.

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