

# ***Brief History and Results of the Rural Restaurant Healthy Options Program: Testing and Statewide Dissemination***

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Rural areas of the country have been especially affected by the obesity epidemic. Because many people eat in restaurants this is a possible point of environmental intervention. Small, owner-operated rural restaurants simply cannot afford many of the restaurant programs currently available. Unlike chain restaurants, there is also little standardization in regard to food preparation procedures and portion sizes delivered to customers. Rural restaurant owners are hesitant to make significant menu changes because of their small profit margin and concern about losing customers.

This project was a low-cost, low risk intervention in rural restaurants that was designed to influence ordering behavior. Point-of-purchase interventions such as this are consistent with behavior change theories such as Social Cognitive Theory, in that an “environmental cue” encourages people to make a positive choice. First, a survey was conducted in four restaurants asking customers what kinds of healthy options would interest them. Following this survey, a table sign (plastic holder with removable paper inserts) was placed on each table listing the healthy options the restaurant already offered; for example, have meat baked or broiled instead of fried, toppings on the side, or smaller portions for some items. A newspaper article provided publicity about the program. Owners also placed signs in the front window or entryway that stated “Ask About our Healthy Options Program”. A follow-up survey was administered to customers at periodic intervals and assessed interest in making dietary changes, whether the signs were noticed and how the sign affected their order. Noticing the sign remained fairly stable over time (70%) as did the effect on ordering behavior (34%). Customers reported many ways that they changed their order, like asking for smaller portions, low-fat dressing, choosing a healthier main course, or adding a side salad. Customers appreciated that the owners were trying to make it easier to make healthy choices.

Next, a statewide dissemination study was begun, and twenty-eight rural restaurants participated. **The top reasons for adopting the program were:**

- The restaurant already provides healthy options and the program helps to more effectively communicate this to the customer
- It promotes awareness of nutrition and healthy eating
- The owners want to help others.

Table signs remained in place for the length of the study, and owners reported positive responses from customers and no negative outcomes. Some restaurants even added more healthy options after receiving requests from their customers. **Suggested options listed on the table signs that were selected by the majority of owners included:**

- low-fat salad dressing
- low-fat milk
- meat/fish that is grilled or baked instead of fried
- whole wheat breads
- toppings available on the side

- smaller portions available for some items
- vegetable side options available

### **A sample of owner comments about the program:**

“The program is catching on. A lot of comments on how good things are.”

“Lots of people have said that they didn’t know we offered those things so it’s good to have the table signs, and they’ve been ordering more of the things listed.”

“They [customers] noticed the fact that we were trying to focus on healthy options. We sold a lot of grilled chicken sandwiches and things like that.”

“It seems like we’re picking up more people that are health-conscious and they bring their families. They like the alternative to fried things. All in all we think it’s positive. We don’t want to take the signs down.”

“We have a lot more healthy options and they’ve been ordering more fruit and stuff.”

“People appreciate that there are options. Some people don’t feel comfortable asking about some of the options but they might be more comfortable with asking about them after seeing the healthy options on the signs.”

“They pick up the table signs and look at them. They enjoy that option; everyone wants salads, whole wheat bread and low-fat dressings.”

“The customers are liking it. They’ve been ordering the options and stuff. They’re glad we have it, we’ve always had those options but they just didn’t know it. So they’re glad and they’re ordering the stuff.”

“A lot of them are ‘out-of-towners’ and they like it. “Awed” by someone trying to do something different. People love fresh food (fruits/vegetables).”

“Initially when we put them out, it helped people know they could get smaller portions and salads, that kind of thing. We have a lot of the same people come in; people are more comfortable ordering healthy things now.”

### **Publications:**

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