

Dieters Beware: Calorie Counts May Not Be Real

*Adapted by Personal Safety Nets® from “Calorie counts listed by restaurants and on packaged foods are often inaccurate.”
By Amy Eisinger in the New York News (January, 2010)*



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Dieters beware: those low-calorie meals may not be so healthy after all.

According to a new study, **prepared foods contain an average of 8% more calories than what their packaging label says**, reports Time.com. The study, published in the “Journal of the American Dietetic Association,” also says **restaurant meals can contain up to 18% more calories than what the menu claims.**

But perhaps the worst news for calorie-conscious eaters is that **the Food and Drug Administration says these margins of error are perfectly O.K.**

Susan Roberts, a professor of nutrition at Tufts University, conducted the study of 29 restaurants and 10 frozen-food products. She focused on foods that dieters were likely to include in their diets - meals that claim to be less than 500 calories.

Roberts said that an 8% gain in a single 500 calorie meal, only 40 calories, may not sound like much, but over time, those numbers can really add up. **In a year, eating just 5% more than a 2,000 calorie diet means a potential weight gain of 10 pounds.** “The 18% [in restaurants] and 8% [in packaged foods] figures are just what you need not to lose weight,” said Roberts.

The problem is that federal regulations aren’t tight when it comes to calorie counts. While the net weight of a package of prepared foods must be at least 99% of the advertised weight, **calorie counts are allowed to be off up to 20%.** The federal government plays no role in checking the calorie counts restaurants put on their menus, according to Time.com, which means it’s up to individual states to handle the job.

“And when state inspectors do visit, they have other issues to worry about - like making sure there are no mouse droppings in the kitchen,” Roberts says.

Calorie counts can also be confusing because most menus list each item separately, meaning that many consumers still aren’t getting a clear picture of what they’re eating. Most people pay attention to their main course, but may ignore side dishes, which can add up to just as much. Five of the restaurants Roberts studied had an average of 471 calories in side dishes - way over the 443-calorie average on the entrees.