

McDonald's to put nutrition facts on packaging

CHICAGO - McDonald's Corp. customers will soon know that the Big Mac they bought contains almost half their recommended daily fat intake just by looking at the wrapper.

In its latest measure to fend off critics that blame the world's largest restaurant company for contributing to a rising incidence of obesity and other health problems, McDonald's on Tuesday said it will start printing nutritional information on the packaging of its food.

Information including calories, fat grams, protein, carbohydrates and sodium is already available in brochures at McDonald's restaurants and on the company's Web site.

But putting it on the wrappers puts it right in front of the customer, McDonald's Chief Executive Officer Jim Skinner said.

"We think this the absolutely easiest way to communicate it," Skinner said in an interview. He added that the consumer can then choose whether or not to use the information in deciding what to eat.

"We've given them what they asked for and then people take responsibility about whether they add it up or not add it up," Skinner said.

The information is similar to the labeling food companies are required to put on packages sold in U.S. stores. It includes the amount of the item -- say, 30 fat grams in a Big Mac -- and the percentage of the daily recommended intake, based on a 2,000 calorie diet (47 percent of total recommended fat for the Big Mac.)

Customers also will be able to go to the company's Web site and tailor the information for themselves, using age, gender and other variables.

The new packaging was a useful step, but the company could have gone further, the Center for Science in the Public Interest, said.

"A far better step would be to provide calorie counts right on the menu board, so consumers would have that one critical piece of information before they placed their order," Michael Jacobson, executive director of the consumer group, which is frequently critical of the food industry, said in a statement.

McDonald's said it had considered that step, but that the information was too complicated to put on the menu board.

McDonald's plans to have the new packaging in more than 20,000 of its roughly 30,000 restaurants by the end of 2006, starting in February at the Olympic Winter Games in Turin, Italy.

The cost of changing the packaging will have a minimal impact on earnings, Skinner said.

In recent months, McDonald's has undertaken a campaign to promote what it calls balanced, active lifestyles, eliminating "Super Size" menu options, and using marketing and advertising to promote physical activity.

The company also has added several entree-sized salads and grilled chicken sandwiches to its menu.

The campaign followed the 2004 release of Morgan Spurlock's film "Super Size Me," a cautionary tale about the dangers of eating too much fast food, in which the filmmaker subsisted on nothing but McDonald's fare for a month.

McDonald's shares were down 13 cents at \$32.99 on the New York Stock Exchange.