

HEALTH ASSURANCE AT MEXICAN RESTAURANTS IN THE CITY OF LAREDO

The goal of our research project was to increase awareness of, and provide information about healthy eating choices at local restaurants in order to reduce diabetes and obesity. To achieve this goal, we worked toward an objective to track the healthy menu choices selected and promoted at four Mexican food establishments. Promotion of healthy eating selections was conducted at El Rancho Restaurant and three Danny's Restaurant locations throughout Laredo, Texas. The test period was from July 2 through July 29, 2006. With the assistance of a registered dietitian, we analyzed participating restaurants' menus. The healthiest menu options were selected for intense promotion. To promote the selections, we designed and provided table tents and pamphlets with general information on healthy eating, diabetes, and obesity; one table tent was placed on each table. Menu boards were placed at the entrance of each restaurant that further displayed the healthy selections. Tracking of food sales without promotion was conducted from July 2–July 15 and with promotion from July 16–29. We analyzed the frequency and percentages of customers who chose the healthy menu options prior and during the promotion period. During the two weeks of the promotion, the study showed a slight increase in the quantity of promoted selections ordered.

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INTRODUCTION

Obesity and diabetes are the result of a combination of many physical, psychological, and social factors. Physical factors include heredity and current health status; psychological factors consist of health beliefs, nutrition knowledge, religious beliefs; social factors include ethnicity, lifestyle, and peer influences. In the state of Texas, obesity and diabetes are growing at an alarming rate, with a higher rate in the Hispanic-dominant community of Laredo. The importance of this study was to determine if a lack of knowledge in nutrition is the reason people are not eating healthy foods, and if their behavior influenced by the environment can be changed. We chose to provide awareness information along with the promotion of healthy meal choices.

METHODS

We targeted four Mexican, family-dining restaurants for our study; El Rancho "Su Majestad El Taco" and three Danny's Restaurant facilities. The three Danny's Restaurants are located in Laredo's downtown, south, and north areas. El Rancho is located in the outer northern region of Laredo and is a branch of the main restaurant in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico. For permission to conduct our study, we partnered with the managers and owners of these restaurants in conjunction with the City of Laredo Health Department. With the assistance of the health departments' registered dietitians we analyzed the menus and proposed possible healthy selections. Using the Nutritionist Pro[®] software we were able to calculate and classify the

healthier options based on their nutritional values of calories, proteins, carbohydrates, and fats. Evaluations of selected dishes were presented to the owners and managers for approval; to highlight the healthy dishes, announcement boards were placed at the restaurants' entrances. Through the use of table tents and pamphlets, we promoted healthful eating and the importance of physical activity.

To track the frequency of healthy selections, each establishment provided data on daily and weekly menu item sales. The observation period occurred during four weeks, beginning July 2, 2006 and ending July 29, 2006. Data was collected for two weeks both before and during the promotional efforts to allow for comparison and effect of promotional activities on menu choices.

DATA

During the two weeks of the promotion, the study showed a slight increase in the quantity of promoted selections ordered. For this time period, the El Rancho restaurant sold 14,878 plates during the "no promotion" period and sold 15,233 during the promotion. The percentages of the dishes are part of the total items selected. The Mexican-style shrimp increased .045%, the steamed fish fillet .005%, the salmon fillet .016%, steamed chicken breast .103%, and the tlalpeno soup .245%. The Mexican fillet decreased by .06%. and there was no significant difference in the sales of tuna salad. The data from sales at the Danny's Restaurant chain was also analyzed and produced similar results of an increase in the number of healthy dishes ordered. All three locations showed a higher quantity

of promoted selections sold. All the Danny's Restaurants, during the no-promotion period sold 20,095 plates of the healthful items and 31,659 items during the promotion. The percentages of "before promotion" and "after promotion" are conclusive and show that promotion of selected dishes is evident. Both the chicken fajita plate and diet chicken plate increased by .021% and .048%, respectively. There was no significant difference in both the low-calorie plate and large chicken soup, while there was a decrease in the small chicken soup of .026%.

DISCUSSION

Through the duration of this investigation, we provided information of the obesity and diabetes epidemic in Laredo, Texas. Our intent was to contribute to the awareness of chronic diseases to decrease its incidence in our city. Laredo is a thriving community built on a dominant Hispanic society. From

the study, we wanted to show that Mexican-oriented restaurants have healthy alternatives that can help in the prevention of obesity and diabetes. By promoting healthy dishes at these restaurants, we have empowered Laredoans with the knowledge of what is healthy in order for them to make improved, informed decisions.

Once the promotion began, educational pamphlets were provided to the restaurants of the study. We were encouraged when more pamphlets had to be provided to the restaurants midway through the study. This provided further evidence that customers were responding to the "Know Healthy, Eat Healthy" promotion. Throughout the four weeks, the three Danny's Restaurant locations experienced a decrease in sales while the percentage of the healthier dishes ordered increased. At the El Rancho Restaurant, both sales and the percentage of the selected dishes increased.

The partnership and cooperation between the establishments were essential to improve greater awareness of nutrition and health issues among Laredo residents. The restaurants have now incorporated this initiative and have continued distinguishing their healthy dishes. El Rancho "Su Majestad El Taco" continues to highlight its healthy dishes and will create a light or diet dish section in their menus. Danny's restaurants have an existing diet/light section on their menu and will continue to promote it.

In this generation, we have learned that society thrives on a fast-paced lifestyle making fast food restaurants the dominant food providers. We realize that this cannot be changed but our focus was to show, that even in this situation, it is still possible to maintain healthy eating habits. The project confirms that it is okay to eat where you like, as long as you "Know Healthy to Eat Healthy."