

# SODIUM SAFETY WARNING LABELING IN PHILADELPHIA

## 2020-2023 Analysis

### Background

Philadelphia has high rates of hypertension and premature death from heart disease. Consuming too much sodium can increase blood pressure and risk of heart disease and stroke. Most of the sodium in our diet comes from restaurant and processed foods. Decreasing sodium intake has the potential to decrease hypertension rates by 25%. Most people don't know how much sodium they are consuming when they dine out. Sodium warnings on restaurant menus can help consumers make choices that protect their health.

In September 2018, Philadelphia's Health Code was amended to add Sodium Safety Warning Labeling for Chain Restaurants, requiring chain restaurants\* to display Sodium Warnings next to menu items or combo meals containing as much or more than the recommended daily amount, 2,300 milligrams (mg), of sodium.

The following is a Philadelphia Department of Public Health (PDPH) analysis of 2023 data on high sodium menu items at chain restaurants in Philadelphia.

In 2023, there were 132 chains, with 850 locations throughout Philadelphia, required to comply with the Sodium Safety Warning Labeling law. 5% (45) of those locations did not provide nutrition information, or had other special circumstances, and could not be included in this analysis.

[\\*See definition of chain restaurants and other FAQ here](#)

### OF THE 805 CHAIN RESTAURANT LOCATIONS INCLUDED IN THIS ANALYSIS:



52% (419) had menu items requiring sodium warnings.


28% REQUIRED THE LABEL




△ SODIUM WARNING  
△ SODIUM WARNING  
△ SODIUM WARNING


28% (118) of the 52% (419) locations required sodium warnings on more than half of their menu items.


### Chains & High Sodium Menu Items

 High sodium menu items contained from **2,300 to over 20,000 mg** of sodium.

 Menu items highest in sodium were **wings, fried chicken, chicken sandwiches or chicken tenders, and ribs.**

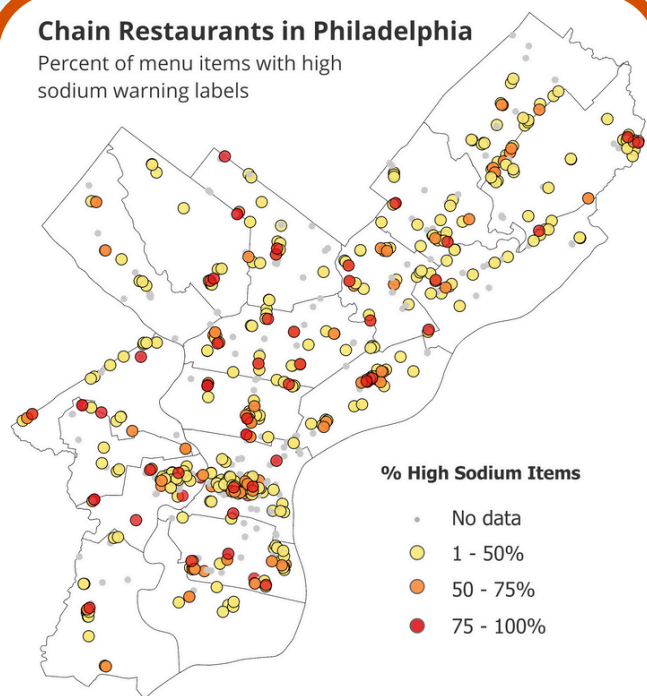
 Salads also had high sodium amounts, due to **toppings and dressings.**

 **Nachos and sandwiches/wraps** rounded out the **top five** menu categories with the **highest amounts of sodium.**

 The majority of the **48% (386)** of chain restaurant locations that had **no high sodium menu items** (based on provided nutrition information) were **bakeries, dessert shops, coffee shops, bagel shops** and other specialty chains with a more limited menu.

### Chain Restaurants in Philadelphia

Percent of menu items with high sodium warning labels



#### % High Sodium Items

- No data
- 1 - 50%
- 50 - 75%
- 75 - 100%

Any menu item with 2,300 mg of sodium or more is considered high sodium. 2,300 mg is the recommended daily amount of sodium.

Source: Sodium Warning Labeling Law Database, PDPH, 2023

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## Kid's Menus



### RECOMMENDATION

Children 13 years and under have even lower recommended daily amounts of sodium (ranging from 1,200 to 1,800 mg).



### CURRENTLY

However, kid's menu items exceed 2,300 mg of sodium and require sodium warnings.



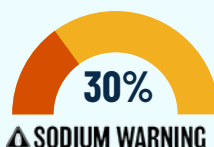
### GOAL

Chain restaurants should have no kid's menu items that require sodium warnings.

**IN 2023, THERE WERE 52 CHAINS WITH 281 LOCATIONS THAT HAD KID'S MENUS:**



40 chains, with 259 locations, provided nutrition information for kid's menu items.



Among those, 12 chains (30%), with 24 locations (9%), had kid's menus with high sodium items.



High sodium menu items were often a combo meal, which includes an entree, side and drink.

## 2020-2023 Comparison

One desired outcome of implementing sodium safety warnings is that chains will reformulate recipes to reduce the amount of sodium in menu items.

**Among 63 restaurant chains for which PDPH had three years of complete data (2020, 2022, and 2023), we saw a reduction in the portion of those menus that would require a sodium warning label. In 2020, 31% of menu items at chains required a sodium warning label, on average, compared to 21% in 2023.**

While this may indicate a decline in the number of high sodium menu items at chain restaurants in Philadelphia since the sodium safety labeling law took effect, we interpret this with caution as there were some inconsistencies with data collection, and only a subset of chains had all three years of data.

## Summary & Next Steps

Since many Philadelphians live with chronic diseases that can be exacerbated by excess sodium, chain restaurants should strive to improve their menus and alter recipes to reduce sodium levels to an amount that aligns more closely to a per-meal recommendation such as 800 mg. PDPH will continue to notify chain restaurants annually about the Sodium Safety Warning Labeling law and which menu items require the warning label.

Going forward, PDPH will also:



### NOTIFY CHAINS

Notify chain restaurants if they have menus with more than 50% high sodium items (and/or any high sodium kid's menu items) and encourage reformulation and reduction.



### INCREASE CHECKS

Increase compliance checks and follow-up notification and enforcement, including around the requirement for chain restaurants to label menu items on their digital platforms.



### PURSUE REGULATION

Pursue policy changes to improve implementation, such as requiring chain restaurants to submit menu information to PDPH on an annual basis.