



The Honorable Heather Bagnall, House Chair and Members  
House Health Committee  
241 Taylor House Office Building  
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 1048**  
***THE INFORMED DINING ACT***  
**HOUSE HEALTH COMMITTEE**  
**February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2026**

**The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) wishes to be recorded in strong support of HB 1048, *The Informed Dining Act*.**

The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), a nonprofit consumer education and advocacy organization that has worked since 1971 to improve public health through better nutrition and safer food, writes in strong support of HB 1048, *The Informed Dining Act*. This legislation improves the restaurant food environment in Maryland by requiring clear icons on chain restaurant menu items that contain half a day's recommended sodium or added sugars. By strengthening transparency at the point of purchase, the bill supports informed decision-making and can help reduce the risk of diet-related chronic disease.

Excess sodium and added sugars consumption remain significant public health concerns. The 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend limiting sodium to less than 2,300 milligrams per day and limiting added sugars to less than 10 percent of total daily calories.<sup>1</sup> Excess sodium intake increases blood pressure,<sup>2,3</sup> and elevated blood pressure is a major risk factor for heart disease and stroke.<sup>4</sup> Higher intake of added sugars is associated with increased risk of type 2 diabetes,<sup>5</sup> cardiovascular disease mortality,<sup>6</sup> and dental caries.<sup>7</sup>

These risks are reflected in Maryland's health profile. According to the Maryland Department of Health's Chronic Disease Burden Tables, 35.8 percent of adults in the state have hypertension and 12.3 percent have diabetes.<sup>8</sup>

Much of the sodium and added sugars in the American diet comes from restaurant and packaged foods. More than 70 percent of sodium consumed in the United States comes from packaged and restaurant foods, rather than from salt added at the table.<sup>9</sup> Sugar-sweetened beverages remain the largest source of added sugars in the U.S. diet.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, consumers significantly underestimate sodium levels in restaurant meals,<sup>11</sup> and survey research shows that consumers correctly identify menu items containing more than a day's worth of added sugars only about half (49%) of the time.<sup>12</sup>

Chain restaurant meals frequently approach or exceed recommended daily limits. A nationally representative analysis of default combination meals at U.S. fast food and fast casual restaurants

found that the average combination meal contained 2,110 milligrams of sodium and 68 grams of sugar—values that approach the daily limit for sodium and exceed the recommended daily limit for added sugars.<sup>13</sup> These levels make it difficult to regularly consume restaurant meals while maintaining a diet consistent with national dietary guidance. For example:

- The Subway Footlong Big Hot Pastrami contains **3,050 milligrams of sodium**.<sup>14</sup>
- The Chick-fil-A Cobb Salad contains **2,220 milligrams of sodium**.<sup>15</sup>
- The Smoothie King Coco Pitaya-Yah™ Smoothie Bowl contains **71 grams of added sugars**.<sup>16</sup>
- A 20-ounce Taco Bell Pepsi contains **69 grams of added sugars**.<sup>17</sup>
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To put that into perspective, 69 grams of sugar equals approximately 17 teaspoons,<sup>18</sup> illustrating how nutrient levels that appear modest on a menu can represent substantial quantities when translated into familiar measures.

CSPI's national soda analysis found that most "small" regular sodas sold at the top 20 fast-food chains contain more than a full day's worth of added sugars, most "large" sizes contain roughly double the recommended daily amount, and even some "kids" sizes exceed daily recommendations.<sup>19</sup>

Although federal law requires calorie labeling on chain restaurant menus,<sup>20</sup> calorie information alone does not address this problem. Two menu items with similar calorie counts can differ dramatically in sodium or added sugar content, making nutrient-specific disclosure necessary.

Large chain restaurants already calculate sodium and added sugars as part of their standardized recipes and nutrition analysis. Many major national chains including McDonald's,<sup>21</sup> Taco Bell,<sup>22</sup> KFC,<sup>23</sup> and Dunkin'<sup>24</sup>—publish added sugars information online, and all chains subject to federal menu labeling provide sodium information in written nutrition materials.<sup>25</sup> However, this information is not presented consistently at the point of purchase and often requires additional steps for consumers to access. As a result, individuals face an uneven and fragmented information landscape when trying to make informed decisions. HB 1048 addresses this gap by ensuring that items containing extraordinarily high levels of sodium or added sugars are clearly identified at point of purchase.

Marketing practices further influence purchasing patterns. In 2019 alone, fast food chains such as McDonald's, Domino's, and Taco Bell spent nearly \$418 million on television advertising targeted to Black and Hispanic children and teens, and the vast majority of those ads promoted full-calorie, adult-sized menu items rather than kids' meals..<sup>26</sup> These patterns increase exposure to products high in sodium and added sugars among youth.

HB 1048 addresses this information gap through a proportionate and balanced standard. The bill requires an icon next to menu items containing half a day's recommended sodium or added sugars. A MenuStat-based analysis of 19,038 menu items across 91 top-grossing chain restaurants in the U.S. and found that a full-day sodium threshold would label only 5 percent of items, whereas a 50 percent Daily Value threshold would label 20 percent.<sup>27</sup> In other words, the majority of menu items would not carry an icon under this standard.

Evidence supports this approach. In a randomized controlled trial involving more than 15,000

U.S. adults, icon-only added sugar warnings improved identification of high-added-sugar items and supported more informed selections.<sup>28</sup> A meta-analysis of sugary drink warning studies found that warning labels improve consumer understanding and support more informed beverage choices.<sup>29</sup> Additional experimental research demonstrates that graphic and icon-based warnings are more effective than text-only warnings, and that icon warnings have a stronger impact among Latino parents and parents with low English literacy, highlighting the importance of visual design for equitable communication.<sup>30,31</sup>

Experience in U.S. cities demonstrates both feasibility and durability. New York City adopted a sodium warning icon rule in 2015,<sup>32</sup> with enforcement beginning later that year, and Philadelphia adopted and implemented a similar sodium warning policy beginning in 2021.<sup>33</sup> Following implementation in Philadelphia, the share of menu items requiring a sodium warning declined from 31 percent to 21 percent over time, suggesting recipe reformulation or menu adjustments in response to the policy.<sup>34</sup> More recently, New York City finalized and began implementing *The Sweet Truth Act*, requiring added sugars warnings on chain restaurant menus.<sup>35</sup> Together, these experiences show that nutrient disclosure policies can be implemented at scale in large jurisdictions and sustained over time.

In addition to improving consumer transparency, HB 1048 establishes a uniform statewide standard, ensuring consistent information across Maryland and preventing a patchwork of local requirements. The bill pairs icons with clear explanatory language so that consumers understand what the symbol represents, rather than relying on a visual marker alone. It directs the Maryland Department of Health to provide implementation guidance and education to support consistent compliance. Importantly, the legislation includes a report-back requirement to the General Assembly, allowing lawmakers to evaluate evidence of product reformulation and consumer behavior changes over time. These provisions reflect a balanced, practical approach that strengthens accountability while supporting smooth implementation.

HB 1048 does not restrict consumer choice. It does not prohibit any products. It simply ensures that Marylanders receive clear, consistent information when ordering food in chain restaurants.

For these reasons, CSPI respectfully urges a favorable report on HB 1048.

Sincerely,



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