

Nutritional labeling and point-of-purchase signs influence healthy food choices

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Poor diet and physical inactivity leading to obesity are poised to overtake tobacco use as the leading cause of preventable death in the United States. With over 30% of U.S. adults obese, the significant adverse health effects of obesity (including heart disease and diabetes) are widespread throughout the country. Two studies published in the August issue of the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* shed light on behaviors regarding food choices and good nutrition and report on how nutritional labeling and point-of-purchase signs are influencing healthy food choices.

"Food Label Use and Its Relation to Dietary Intake among U.S. Adults" by Nicholas J. Ollberding, PhD, Randi L. Wolf, PhD, and Isobel Contento, PhD, all of the Program in Nutrition, Department of Health and Behavior Studies, Teachers College, Columbia University, examined to what extent people used the nutritional label on food products and whether that use affected their nutrient intake.

Using a nationally representative sample of U.S. adults who participated in the 2005-2006 National Health and [Nutrition Examination Survey](#) (NHANES), the authors found that 61.6% of participants reported using the nutrition facts panel, 51.6% used the list of ingredients, 47.2% read the serving size, and 43.8% reviewed health claims at least sometimes when deciding to purchase a food product.

Significant differences in mean nutrient intake of total calories, total fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, sodium, dietary fiber, and sugars were

observed between food label users and non-users with label users reporting healthier nutrient consumption. The greatest differences observed were for total calories and fat and for use of specific nutrient information on the food label.

"If the food label is to have a greater public health impact, rates of use will likely need to be increased among U.S. adults," commented Professor Ollberding. "Low rates of label use also suggest that national campaigns or modification of the food label may be needed to reduce the proportion of the population not using this information. Possible changes to the current label that have been suggested include bolding calorie information, reporting the total nutrient intake for foods likely to be consumed in a single sitting, and using more intuitive labeling that requires less cognitive processing such as a red, yellow, and green 'traffic light' signs on the front of the label. The food label alone is not expected to be sufficient in modifying behavior ultimately leading to improved health outcomes, but may be used by individuals and nutrition professionals as a valuable and motivating tool in our efforts to combat obesity and diet-related chronic disease."

A pilot study of a Point-of-Purchase (POP) program was shown to influence the purchasing behaviors of a multi-ethnic college population shopping at an on-campus convenience store. The results are reported in "Point-of-Purchase Nutrition Information Influences Food-Purchasing Behaviors of College Students: A Pilot Study" by Marjorie R. Freedman, PhD, and Rachel A. Connors, MS, from the Department of Nutrition, Food Science & Packaging, San Jose State University.

This 11-week study collected baseline sales data for 6 weeks during the middle of the Fall 2008 semester. After students returned from Winter break, "Eat Smart" program materials featuring the "Fuel Your Life" logo were placed in the on-campus convenience store. Sales data were collected during the middle of the Spring 2009 semester for 5 weeks,

ending just before students left for Spring break.

Healthful items in seven food categories (cereal, bread, soup, cracker, canned vegetable, granola/energy bar, and salad dressing) were tagged throughout the market. There was no difference in price between the tagged and untagged items. While no significant difference in sales of any particular food item was observed between baseline and intervention, overall sales of tagged items, as a percentage of total sales in the cereal, soup, and cracker categories, increased as a result of the intervention, while sales of tagged bread items decreased. Though not statistically significant, the intervention resulted in a 3.6% increase in the percentage of sales from tagged items.

Writing in the article, Freedman and Connor state, "This pilot project was the first to use computerized sales data to examine the effect of a POP nutrition information program on the food-buying habits of multi-ethnic college students. Promising (albeit, not statistically significant) results imply that students were influenced by "Fuel Your Life" shelf tags and related materials. Despite several study limitations, the program was successful in increasing the percentage of tagged food items sold relative to other non-tagged items in the same category. Keeping all items in the same category at the same price meant that consumer choice was based on perceived nutritional benefit, not economics."

"This research indicates that a simple logo helped students identify healthful food choices, and positively influenced food choice," commented Professor Freedman. "It would be interesting to determine if a combination of point-of-purchase nutrition information, coupled with economic incentives (e.g. lower prices for healthier foods) would further drive consumers to choose these healthier [food](#) items. We must aggressively test such options in light of the increasing threat of obesity to the health of our society."

More information:

Ollberding NJ, Wolf RL, Contento I. Food label use and its relation to dietary intake among U.S. adults. J Am Diet Assoc.

2010;110:1233-1237. [DOI:10.1016/j.jada.2010.05.007](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jada.2010.05.007)

Freedman MR, Connors RA. Point-of-purchase nutrition information influences food-purchasing behaviors of college students: A pilot study.

J Am Diet Assoc. 2010;110:1222-1226. [DOI:](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jada.2010.05.002)

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