

'Low-content' nutritional claims on packaged goods misleading for consumers

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No fat, no sugar, no salt? What does it mean? Today, supermarket shelves are filled with products that make a variety of claims related to their perceived health benefits. As many Americans try to make better food choices, companies have been quick to adopt packaging that makes "low-content" nutrient claims such as "low-fat" or "low-sodium."

Because there is no uniformity to what these statements mean, consumers are often left confused and ill informed. A new study in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* found that simply making a low-content claim on the label was not a reliable indicator of a product's actual nutritional quality and that these claims may give consumers a false sense of confidence about the healthfulness of their food.

Investigators wanted to examine what effects these low-content claims had on purchasing habits, as well as what relationship they had to the actual nutritional content of foods. After looking at data that included over 80 million food and beverage purchases from over 40,000 households, they found that 13% of food and 35% of beverage purchases had a low-content claim, and that "low-fat" was the most common claim, followed by "low-calorie," "low-sugar," and "low-sodium." While the data revealed that products with some sort of claim had lower mean energy, total sugar, total fat, and sodium densities, they did not always represent the best nutritional value. The study suggests that because labels only need to make claims relative to other similar foods and not a standard definition of what "low" means, these claims do not offer consumers any real information or give a good indication of

the general healthiness of the food.

"Our results demonstrate that for overall packaged foods and beverages, purchases featuring a low-/no-nutrients claim do not necessarily offer better overall nutritional profiles or even better profiles for the particular nutrients that are the subject of the claim, relative to other choices with no claim," explained lead investigator Lindsey Smith Taillie, PhD, researcher assistant professor, Gillings School of Global Public Health, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "This is likely due in part to "low" or "reduced" claims being relative within brands or specific food categories."

Because there is, for example, no agreement about what constitutes a low-sugar cookie, researchers say consumers need to be cautious. A cookie that is marked "low-sugar" may contain less sugar than the "regular" version, but that low-sugar claim doesn't guarantee it contains less sugar than other cookies. "In other words," remarked Dr. Taillie, "a low-/no-nutrient claim means different things for different foods. This could potentially lead to confusion if consumers focus on seeking out products with specific nutrient claims or use a claim to justify the purchase of less-healthy foods. In fact, these results suggest (but are not conclusive) that in some cases, products that tend to be high in calories, sodium, sugar, or fat actually may be more likely to have low-/no-content claims."

While the study focused on whether these claims had any connection to the actual nutritional value of the food and beverage items, investigators also looked at the groups who were more likely to purchase foods that made these statements. They found that while differences in purchasing patterns by race/ethnicity were not significant, non-Hispanic white households were the most likely to buy products with a "low-calorie" claim and that Asian households preferred foods with "low-fat" or "low-sodium" claims. Non-Hispanic black households were the least likely to purchase food groups with any low-content claim.

There was also a connection between socioeconomic status (SES) and food purchases. Researchers found that high- and middle-SES households were more likely to purchase food and beverages with low-content claims.

As consumers try to navigate an ever-increasing number of [food](#) and beverage choices, being able to parse what these claims mean will become even more critical. These findings show how the lack of consistency about what these statements mean can lead content claims to be used to sell generally unhealthy foods as a healthier alternative. "A key question for future research will be to examine how these claims affect consumer choice, as well as how claims interact with other common strategies, like sales or price promotions, to influence purchasing behavior and ultimately, dietary quality," concluded Dr. Taillie.

More information: "No Fat, No Sugar, No Salt...No Problem? Prevalence of "Low-Content" Nutrient Claims and Their Associations with the Nutritional Profile of Food and Beverage Purchases in the United States," *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, [DOI: 10.1016/j.jand.2017.01.011](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jand.2017.01.011)

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