

Study finds shortcomings in Canadian regulations governing use of sugar claims

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Consumers believe products with "no added sugar" claims are healthier and lower in calories. But is there evidence to support this belief? In a new study published today in *Applied Physiology, Nutrition, and Metabolism*, researchers at the University of Toronto report that prepackaged food and beverages labelled with claims such as "no added sugar" or "reduced in sugar" can have lower sugar levels than products without sugar claims but may not have notable reductions in calories and some can contain amounts of sugar considered in "excess" by the World Health Organization.

Are Canadian consumers being misinformed by sugar claims?

Jodi Bernstein, lead author of the study and PhD student in the Department of Nutritional Sciences, says there is "misalignment" among consumer perceptions, how regulations define "added sugar", and the relative amount of free sugar in products—that is, sugar no longer in its naturally occurring state such as the juice from an orange versus an orange in its whole-fruit form.

Under the current Canadian Food and Drug Regulations, labelling on food products must "be accurate, truthful and not misleading." However, under these same regulations fruit juice—a significant source of free sugar—is commonly considered a fruit ingredient, not a sweetener. Fruit drinks, or products with fruit juice, can still carry a "no sugar added" claim even if they contain excess free sugar. Bernstein was surprised that 15 of the 16 fruit preserves and all 234 fruit juices and juice drinks with "no sugar added" claims, had excess free sugar.

Using data from the University of Toronto's Food Label Information Program (FLIP), the researchers determined the differences in calories and nutrients of Canadian prepackaged foods and beverages with and without sugar claims. Overall healthfulness of the products was scored based on nutrients to avoid—calories, saturated fat, sodium, sugar—and

nutrients and components encouraged for consumption—fibre, protein, fruits, vegetables, legumes, and nuts.

Over 3000 products including puddings, yogurts, cereals, fruit drinks, salad dressings, and sweet condiments ([fruit](#) preserves and syrups) were evaluated; 635 products had at least one sugar claim. Products with sugar claims had better healthfulness scores than similar products without claims but nearly half of these products still contained excess free sugar.

Bernstein advocates for changes to the current nutrient labelling guidelines. "Stricter criteria" are needed, she says. Bernstein and her colleagues propose sugar reduction or no added sugar claims should only be on products "with calorie reductions and without excessive free sugar content," and that meet an overall "healthy" criteria.

"This research is particularly well-timed given the emergence of dietary guidelines suggesting the need to limit free [sugar](#) intakes and the increased interest in reducing [sugar consumption](#) among Canadians," the authors say.

Last year Health Canada released its *Healthy Eating Strategy* to "engage the public and stakeholders to seek feedback and input on a proposed front of package labelling approach aimed at helping Canadians make healthier and more informed choices, particularly on sugars, sodium and saturated fats."

More information: *Applied Physiology, Nutrition, and Metabolism* (2017). [DOI: 10.1139/apnm-2017-0169](https://doi.org/10.1139/apnm-2017-0169)

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