

Clearer food labels might help with healthy food choices

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A study published in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* shows that food labels that clearly display the total number of calories and nutrients in the entire package, rather than just part of it, might help people make healthier food choices.

The Nutrition Facts label was introduced 20 years ago and provides consumers with important information, including: the serving size, the number of servings in the package, the number of calories per serving, and the amount of nutrients for each serving of a packaged food. However, research has shown that consumers often miscalculate the number of calories and the nutritional content of products that have two or more servings per container but are usually consumed in a single-eating occasion.

Two nutrition labeling changes could have the potential to make nutritional content information easier to understand: 1. dual-column information that details single serving and total package nutrition information, and 2. declaring nutritional information for the entire container.

Researchers from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) conducted an online study with more than 9,000 participants to measure consumers' accuracy in using modified versions of the Nutrition Facts label and to assess their perceptions of how useful, trustworthy, and helpful the label was.

Study participants evaluated nine modified Nutrition Facts labels and the current label format for four fictitious products (two frozen meals and two grab-and-go bags of chips). The labels were classified into three groups. The first group of labels used a single-column format to display information for products with two servings per container; the second group used versions of a dual-column format to display information for products with two servings per container; and the third group used single-column format that listed the contents of the product as a single, large serving.

The researchers also tested whether changes in formatting, such as enlarging the font size for the declaration of "calories," removing the information on the number of calories from fat, or changing the wording for the serving size declaration, would be helpful to consumers in determining the calories and other nutrient information for a single serving and for the entire package.

The researchers determined that participants could more accurately assess the number of calories or amount of fat or other nutrients per serving and in the entire package when a single, large serving per container format or a dual-column format was used.

“This research is just one step in understanding how some potential food label modifications might help consumers make better decisions. Ideally, we would like to see how these labels perform in a more realistic setting, such as in a grocery store, with actual packaged foods as opposed to large labels on a computer screen,” said Serena C. Lo, researcher with the FDA. “The Nutrition Facts label is only one tool that can help consumers make informed food choices and maintain healthy dietary practices, but it is a valuable tool so it’s important to continue exploring ways to support effective use of the label for these purposes.”