



Nutrition Facts Panels: Who Uses Them, What Do They Use, and How Does Use Relate to Dietary Intake?



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ABSTRACT

Background Nutrition labels are a low-cost tool with the potential to encourage healthy eating habits.

Objective To investigate correlates of frequent Nutrition Facts label use, describe the types of label information most often used, and measure how label use relates to dietary intake in young adults.

Design Cross-sectional population-based study of young adults participating in Project Eating and Activity in Teens and Young Adults-IV.

Participants/setting Surveys and food frequency questionnaires were completed during 2015-2016 by young adults (N=1,817; weighted sample=49% women) aged 25 to 36 years.

Main outcome measures Nutrition Facts label use, frequency of using specific information on labels, and dietary intake.

Statistical analyses performed Relative risks and adjusted means were used to examine how demographic, behavior, and weight-related factors were associated with Nutrition Facts panel use, and how label use related to dietary outcomes. Associations with *P* values <0.05 were considered statistically significant.

Results Approximately one-third (31.4%) of participants used Nutrition Facts labels “frequently.” Use was significantly higher for women; for participants with high education and income; among those who prepared food regularly; among those who were physically active; among those with a weight status classified as overweight; and among those who were trying to lose, gain, or maintain weight. Label components used most often included sugars (74.1%), total calories (72.9%), serving size (67.9%), and the ingredient list (65.8%). Nutrition Facts label users consumed significantly more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains and fewer sugar-sweetened beverages, compared with nonusers. Nutrition Facts label users ate significantly more frequently at sit-down restaurants but less frequently at fast-food restaurants compared with nonusers.

Conclusions Although Nutrition Facts label use was associated with markers of better dietary quality in a population-based sample of young adults, only one-third of participants used labels frequently. Methods to improve label use should be studied, particularly through leveraging weight- or health-related goals (eg, interest in making healthier food choices), and meeting consumer preferences concerning label content. *J Acad Nutr Diet.* 2018;118:217-228.

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NUTRITION LABELS ARE AN INFORMATION TOOL with the potential for encouraging healthful purchasing and eating habits. In the overall US population, use of nutrition labels on packaged foods has been related to healthier dietary choices¹; however, systematic reviews show that consumers may not frequently use nutrition labels to make food choices.^{1,2} Nutrition Facts labels have been required on most packaged foods in the United States since the passage of the Nutritional Labeling and Education Act of 1990.³ During May 2016, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) released rules to update the Nutrition

Facts panel format and content to make labels more understandable, reflect scientific developments on the role of diet in disease risk, and update servings sizes to better align with actual dietary intake.⁴ In the context of this recent policy change, research on Nutrition Facts preferences, and how use relates to dietary quality, is particularly timely and necessary.

Research examining characteristics of Nutrition Facts label users and the relationship between Nutrition Facts use and self-reported dietary intake has suggested label use is related to markers of a healthy diet, but the specific outcomes and influence are less clear. Ollberding and colleagues⁵ found Nutrition Facts panel use among National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) 2005-2006 participants was associated with sociodemographic factors such as being a woman, white, having high education and income, being older, and living alone. Greater use was associated with better dietary patterns, including lower sugar, total fat, saturated fat, and energy consumption. Also in NHANES participants (2007-2010), Bleich and Wolfson⁶ found that Nutrition Facts panel use was higher for women and those with white or Hispanic race/ethnicity, high education, and those engaging in weight-loss activities such as physical activity and using commercial diets, but not weight status.

Measuring Nutrition Facts label use in young adults is particularly crucial given the poor dietary quality exhibited by many young adults,⁷ the importance of this period in the establishment of long-term dietary habits⁸ and chronic disease prevention,⁹ and the potential secondary influence that young adults may have on the dietary choices and habits of their own children.^{10,11} Previous studies in young adults have reported that female participants¹²⁻¹⁴ and those with higher nutrition knowledge or education^{12,13} may be more likely to use Nutrition Facts labels. For dietary quality, researchers have found that self-reported general label use (not necessarily Nutrition Facts) was related to consuming more fruits and vegetables¹⁵⁻¹⁷ and fiber,¹⁶ and less fried food,¹⁸ but unrelated to dairy or calcium intake.¹⁵ Significant gaps still remain in understanding predictors of Nutrition Facts label use besides basic sociodemographic characteristics, the types of information sought by consumers, and how nutrition label users compare on broad dietary outcomes such as restaurant visits, food groups and micronutrients intake, and compliance with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.¹⁹ Better understanding the types of information that are of interest to consumers can inform future updates to label design and potentially encourage greater label use by aligning policies with consumer preferences.

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the correlates of Nutrition Facts panel use, the types of label information used most frequently, particularly in relation to the 2016 FDA updates to the Nutrition Facts panel, and the relationship between Nutrition Facts use and measures of dietary intake in a population-based sample of young adults. Available data allowed for building on previous studies by considering a broader range of sociodemographic, weight-related, and behavior-related correlates and a comprehensive set of dietary outcomes. This study aimed to better understand sociodemographic and behavior factors to inform messaging and efforts to promote Nutrition Facts label use and consuming a healthy diet in a population at risk of weight gain and poor dietary outcomes.

RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

Research Question: What are the correlates of frequent Nutrition Facts label use, what label information is most often used, and how does label use relate to dietary intake?

Key Findings: In this cross-sectional study of 1,817 young adults in Project Eating and Activity in Teens and Young Adults-IV, almost one-third of participants used labels frequently. Women and participants with specific weight goals and higher education were particularly likely to read labels. Label users looked at sugars, calories, and serving size most often. Label users and nonusers differed on many dietary outcomes. Label users reported consuming more vegetables, fewer added sugars, and eating less frequently at fast-food restaurants.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design and Sample

Young adults were surveyed as a part of Project Eating and Activity in Teens and Young Adults-IV (EAT-IV), the fourth wave of a longitudinal cohort study measuring diet, physical activity, weight, and related factors in adolescents and young adults. Students were initially recruited for Project EAT-I during 1998-1999 from 31 public middle schools and high schools in the Minneapolis-St Paul metropolitan area of Minnesota. Those who participated in at least one of two prior follow-up surveys were mailed an invitation to participate in Project EAT-IV during 2015-2016 and offered a \$50 incentive. Of the original sample,^{20,21} 2,270 (58.4%) young adults had valid contact information at the start of EAT-IV recruitment, and 1,830 (80.6% of those with contact information) participated in the survey online or by mail. All participants with valid contact information were invited to participate, even when they had moved out of the state or country. The University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board approved the study protocol and all participants provided written informed consent.

Of 1,830 participants in Project EAT-IV, 99.3% (n=1,817) had complete information for the Nutrition Facts variable. Those with complete data on all dietary outcomes (n=1,367) did not differ from the larger sample on age or body mass index (BMI) category, but were more likely to be women, white, highly educated, high income, prepare food regularly, not single parents, and Nutrition Facts users compared with those with incomplete dietary data.

Survey Design

This cross-sectional analysis used data from Project EAT-IV, the fourth wave of a longitudinal cohort study. The Project EAT-IV survey was adapted from the original Project EAT survey²¹ and modified to ensure relevance for the current life stage of cohort participants using the life course perspective²² and formative focus groups with a separate sample of 35 young adults as a guide. Surveys assessed Nutrition Facts use, the frequency of looking at specific information on labels, sociodemographic characteristics, behavior characteristics, and weight-related factors. Scale psychometric properties were examined in the full EAT-IV survey sample and estimates of item test-retest reliability,

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