In US Children and Adults Nutrition Label Use and Intake of Added Sugars

Researchers at the Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, GA 30341, USA, conducted a cross-sectional study to examine the association between nutrition label use and daily added sugar consumption across the United States (US) population.

The study included 9,416 children and adults from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), providing a nationally representative sample for comparing label-reading habits and dietary sugar intake.

The study's analyses showed that adults who read labels frequently consumed 42.8 g less added sugar per day than those who read labels infrequently. Among children, the difference was 14.5 g, with label use reported by caregivers for those under 16 and by older children themselves. These findings highlight the public health potential of food labeling while pointing to socioeconomic differences in its use that warrant further investigation.



Study

The present study aimed to address this knowledge gap and inform future American health and nutrition policies by quantifying usual added sugar intake across label-usage habits and demographic subgroups within the country.

The study was conducted by a research team from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and used data from the 2017–March 2020 NHANES cycle, which included 9,416 non-institutionalized civilians (6,457 adults and 2,959 children).

The analyses assessed participants' dietary intake using two 24-hour recalls, each conducted with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Automated Multiple-Pass Method (AMPM) and linked to the Food Patterns Equivalents Database (FPED).

Concurrently, participants' label habits were assessed using the Flexible Consumer Behavior Survey (FCBS). Participants were classified as frequent users if they checked labels always, most of the time, or sometimes, and infrequent users if they checked labels rarely or never. Individuals aged 16 and older described their own habits, while caregivers responded on behalf of younger children.

The study's statistical analyses used the National Cancer Institute (NCI) method to estimate usual intake while accounting for day-to-day variations in reported consumption.

Results

Across the 2017–March 2020 NHANES sample, the mean usual added sugar intake was 70.3 g per day, representing 13.2% of total calories on average.

In total, 78.1% of adults and 76.3% of children or caregivers reported frequent label use, though this varied significantly by education and income-to-poverty ratio (IPR; family income relative to federal poverty thresholds).

Label use differed by education: 90.3% of college graduates reported checking labels at least sometimes, compared with only 62.6% of adults without a high school diploma. Among adults, frequent label users derived 11.7% of daily calories from added sugars, compared with 17.5% among infrequent users.

Frequent adult label users consumed an estimated 61.7 g of added sugars daily versus 104.4 g among infrequent readers, a 42.8-g difference. The pattern also appeared among children, with those in the frequent-use group consuming 13.9% of daily calories from added sugars versus 16.1% for infrequent users, and 64.5 g daily versus 79.0 g (a difference of 14.5 g).

Among children, the largest difference was observed in higher-income households (family income at least 3.5 times the federal poverty threshold), reaching 43.1 fewer grams daily. Among children in the lowest-income households, the small difference was not statistically significant. Separate analyses of sugar-specific label information showed broadly similar patterns. The association was more consistent across adult subgroups, while findings among children varied by age, sex, race or ethnicity, and household income.

Conclusion

The present study is among the first to examine nutrition label use and added sugar intake in a contemporary, nationally representative US sample.

These findings suggest that food labeling may support lower-sugar choices and identify socioeconomic differences that could affect label use and interpretation. The observational design cannot establish that reading labels caused lower sugar intake. People who already prioritize healthier diets may be more likely to consult labels, and socioeconomic differences could partly explain the findings. Missing label-use responses also limit interpretation. The survey took place as manufacturers introduced updated Nutrition Facts labels, so participants may have encountered different labeling formats.

Future strategies could pair targeted nutrition education with front-of-package warning labels and accessible lower-sugar options to support efforts to reduce added sugar consumption, but further studies are needed to test their effectiveness.

Source:

https://www.news-medical.net/news/20261112/A-43-gram-sugar-gap-separates-adults-who-check-food-labels-from-those-who-rarely-do.aspx