Food Label Use and Knowledge of Nutritional Facts on Sugars among Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

For several decades, research findings have linked sugar consumption to serious health problems including high cholesterol, heart disease, and kidney disease. However, due to the sugar lobby's influence, many of these findings were not publicized. It is also alleged that in 1967, the Sugar Research Foundation paid three Harvard scientists to distort their research results and suggest that fat, not sugar, was the problem in our diets.

Given Louisiana's rising obesity rate among young adults, our study's main objectives are to document undergraduates' food label use; to examine overall knowledge of labeling information on sugar; and to identify factors influencing performance on questions pertaining to Nutrition Facts labels and sugar. Data were collected from a sample of 402 undergraduate students and analyzed using descriptive statistics and the binomial logistic model. For the multivariate analyses, we hypothesized that label use would be influenced by age, gender, household income, and minutes exercised. Knowledge of sugar was hypothesized to be influenced by income, label use, and perceived health status.

Of the 402 respondents, 88% indicated that they never, rarely, or sometimes read labels. About 67% of respondents correctly answered a question about the types of sugars listed on Nutrition Facts labels. The four significant predictors of frequency of nutrition label use were age, gender, household income, and minutes exercised, as expected, while knowledge of sugar was statistically significantly influenced by household income, label use, and perceived health status, also as expected. Older students were 1.055 times more likely to read labels than younger students.

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Females, those who perceived their health to be poor, and those from lower-income households were less likely to read the Nutrition Facts labels. Students who exercised regularly were more likely to read labels. Students from lower-income households, infrequent label users, and those who perceived themselves to be unhealthy were less likely to correctly answer the question about sugar.

Healthcare costs and federal deficits have been rising steadily and are expected to continue their upward trajectory. Food scientists and nutritionists at our institution are using nutrition education to encourage students to adopt healthier lifestyles. Additionally, the Food and Drug Administration is planning to include %Daily Value of added sugars on Nutrition Facts labels beginning in 2021, in lieu of the "calories from fat" column.

Keywords: binomial logistic model, college students, food label use, health status, knowledge of sugar, multivariate analysis, nutrition facts labels