



ERS *Report Summary*

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The Decline in Consumer Use of Food Nutrition Labels, 1995–2006

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Packaged and processed foods sold in the United States began carrying standardized nutrition labels in 1994 when the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act (NLEA) took effect. In addition to a standardized Nutrition Facts panel, the NLEA standardized serving sizes and placed limits on the content and format of health and nutrition claims on the front of packages. The major goal of the new labeling requirement was to increase access to nutrition information and improve consumers' ability to make healthful food choices.



Source: USDA photo, Ken Hammond.

What Is the Issue?

The current format of food nutrition labels and the informational campaign designed to educate consumers on their use are now over 10 years old. Since NLEA took effect, technological change has introduced new sources of nutrition information and the consumption of food away from home has continued to increase. Such changes may have affected the usefulness to consumers of standardized nutrition information on food packages. The Food and Drug Administration is currently considering changes to the format and content of food nutrition labels to encourage increased use. This report examines how consumer use of nutrition labels changed over the decade following the standardization by looking at the trend in use of various nutrition label components as well as how the trend

in use differs across a number of demographic groups. Understanding the changing pattern of nutrition label use in the United States 10 years after NLEA can help inform changes to nutrition labels and interventions aimed at increasing use. Insight from the U.S. experience may also be helpful to policymakers in other countries considering mandatory nutrition labeling to achieve public health goals.

What Did the Study Find?

The study reveals that from 1995-96 to 2005-06, consumer use of nutrition labels when making food purchases declined. Consumer use decreased for most label components: it declined approximately 3 percentage points for the Nutrition Facts panel, 11 percentage points for the ingredient list, and 10 percentage points for the panel's information about calories, fat, cholesterol, and sodium. Only the use of information about fiber and sugars did not decline over the 10-year period. Use of fiber information increased by 2 percentage points, while that for sugars held steady.

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The change in use of the Nutrition Facts panel varied by population groups over the 10-year period. The decrease in use was greatest for individuals 20-29 years old, those with no education beyond high school, and those who spoke primarily Spanish, a group that increased from 2 to 6 percent of the population over the 10-year period.

Younger adults and new residents in the country were least likely to have benefited from the public awareness campaigns conducted just after the new labels were introduced, suggesting that decline in use by those cohorts could be due, in part, to a relative lack of knowledge or awareness. The decline in use observed among the rest of the population suggests some depreciation in the value of the information conveyed since the initial awareness campaigns occurred.

The 2-percentage point increase in use of information about dietary fiber was led by an increase among individuals over age 30. This increase in use may be the result of the increasing popularity of low-carb diets, interest in identifying whole grain foods, or an aging population that is more aware of dietary fiber's health benefits.

How Was the Study Conducted?

Data from the Diet and Health Knowledge Survey, a supplement to the 1994-1996 Continuing Survey of Food Intakes by Individuals, as well as from the Diet Behavior and Nutrition module of the 2005-2006 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, were used to examine the change in label use over time. Although questions related to nutrition label use were similar in the two surveys, care was taken to ensure that the data were comparable for the analysis.

Probit regression techniques were used, as appropriate, for binary outcome variables to test whether the observed changes in use remained significant once the changes in the demographic composition of the United States over the 10-year period were accounted for and to test for differences in the change in use across population groups defined by characteristics such as age, gender, race, and education. The results from the probit regressions were also used to estimate mean changes in label use, as well as for different population subgroups, when controlling for demographic characteristics.