

Dear Healthcare Professional,

The Promise Institute for Heart Health Nutrition is pleased to provide you with e-briefs designed to provide a swift overview of hot, pertinent nutrition information and key learnings that you can apply to your practice.



This month's e-brief highlights the findings from the International Food Information Council Foundation's Food Label & Calorie Research report. As practitioners, food label discussion can be a key component of counseling and an understanding of how this affects client choices is essential. Funded by the Grocery Manufacturers of America, researchers sought to assess consumer understanding of food labels and how labels influence eating practices. Read on for key learnings from this informative mission...

Sincerely,



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The Food Label and your Patients' Food Choices: A Review of the Food Label & Calorie Research - Qualitative Research Findings

We often direct our clients to review the food label to help them make better food choices. Recently the International Food Information Council (IFIC) conducted qualitative research to understand how American adults use food label information and the influence this has on food purchase and consumption, especially in regard to calories. Led by a moderator, focus groups were conducted with respondents that identified themselves as "aware" of the Nutrition Facts Panel and respondents who did not use the Nutrition Facts Panel.

Approximately 40 adults participated and the groups were comprised of respondents that were similar in age, body mass index (BMI) and income status. Those that were nutrition "aware" reported being health and weight conscious, looked for information on the food packaging, and made eating and buying decisions based on the Nutrition Facts Panel. Conversely, those considered to have "limited" use of the Nutrition Facts Panel reported not being health conscious, did not pay attention to the food packaging, and were not concerned about eating and buying foods based on the Nutrition Facts Panel.

Key Findings

Reading the Food Label. Individuals were more likely to review the food label while shopping vs. while they were preparing meals at home. They were also more likely to review the label on new items rather than those they bought frequently. Reported barriers to reading the food label included lack of time and distractions experienced when shopping.

Ideas for Practical Use: Encourage your clients to save packaging or go online to compare

calories and the nutrient density of their favorite frequently consumed foods.

Who's Reading the Label? Although nearly all reported being aware of the label, many revealed that they do not look at it with every purchase. Respondents also noted that they would be more likely to use the label if they were following a particular diet for health reasons.

Ideas for Practical Use: Diagnosis of a health problem or need for particular dietary advice (e.g., pregnancy) may be a time when people are receptive to information on interpreting the Nutrition Facts Panel.

Why Review the Label? Although the reasons for using the food label varied, many respondents cited looking at it for calorie content; others reviewed it for fat, carbohydrates, sugars and sodium, as well as preservatives and ingredients.

Ideas for Practical Use: Highlight to your clients that the statements on a food package may not always give the complete picture about the composition of that food, and encourage them to read the Nutrition Facts Panel for details.

Ease of Use. Participants remarked that the Panel requires too much work or math to figure out how much they should eat of a particular product.

Ideas for Practical Use: Review the % Daily Values (%DV) with clients and how they apply to their personal needs. Provide reference values for applicable nutrients that can be used for quick and easy evaluation of a product.

Easily Identified Areas. The areas that participants are able to identify on the food label without instruction include: fat, calories, carbohydrates, fiber, serving size, protein and sugar.

Ideas for Practical Use: Help clients apply these to their meal plans and educate them on the specifics behind the importance of each value.

Daily Value's Value. The %DV invoked confusion among some participants. Many did not understand how it applied to them or how to use it. Interestingly, after it was described by the moderator, participants reported a better understanding of its use and welcomed the %DV as a useful tool.

Ideas for Practical Use: Discuss the calorie needs of your client and review how to interpret the %DV based on their personal requirements.

Faith in the Food Label. Several participants stated that they were wary of the information presented on the labels, reporting that they find them difficult to interpret or they misunderstand the information on the label.

Ideas for Practical Use: Highlight the difference between statements developed by the manufacturer that can be found on the packaging and the content of the Nutrition Facts Panel and Ingredient Label for which the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is responsible.

Serving Size Perception. Many products presented were considered a single serving by participants, such as a 12 oz soda, 11.5 oz. juice, six cookies or a personal pizza. Participants were surprised to discover that the products contained more than one serving.

Ideas for Practical Use: Review with clients where to find the serving size and number of servings per package information on the Nutrition Facts Panel. Having sample food packages in your office and reviewing the Nutrition Facts Panel on packages while on grocery store tours are both very effective teaching strategies.

In review of the study findings, it was revealed that a simplification of the food label may help consumers manage their calorie intake. This message is being conveyed to the FDA as they review the future of the Nutrition Facts Panel.

Although respondents initially reported some confusion in interpreting the food label, simple, personalized explanations of the information made it more accessible to them. In addition, a study from the Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior found that individuals who reported a greater knowledge of the importance of maintaining a healthy body weight were more likely to utilize the

food labels when making purchasing decisions. The implication for healthcare professionals is that we need to assess nutritional literacy and beliefs about nutrition for health, as well as help clients understand the importance of their diet, to motivate them to use the Nutrition Facts Panel.¹

To review the full report, go to:

http://www.ific.org/research/upload/Calorie_Qualitative_Research.pdf.

1. Blitstein, JL., Evans, WD. Use of nutrition facts panels among adults who make household food purchasing decisions. *J Nutr Educ Behav*. 2006 Nov-Dec; 38(6):360-364.

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