



Who Regularly Uses the Nutrition Facts Label? Exploring Demographic, Socioeconomic, and Geographic Differences

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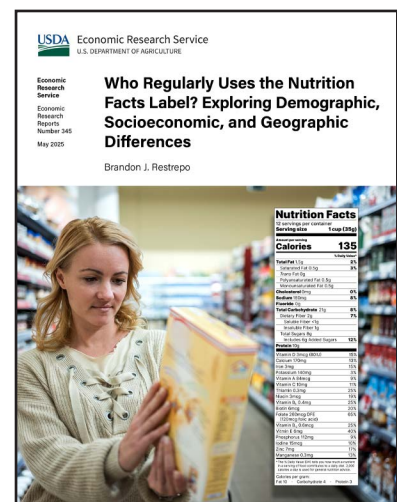
What Is the Issue?

Packaged food labels provide nutrition information to consumers that may help them make healthier food purchase decisions. A Nutrition Facts label has been included on most packaged food products in the United States since the passage of the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act (NLEA) of 1990. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) updated the Nutrition Facts label in 2003 and 2016. In 2003, the FDA added a requirement to declare trans fat content. In 2016, the FDA issued the first major update to the Nutrition Facts label since the original rule was issued in 1990. The design was refreshed, and a declaration of added sugars was added. This report investigates the potential dietary benefits associated with the use of packaged food labels and whether differences exist among U.S. consumers in label use. This report uses the latest publicly available nationally representative data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) to quantify the associations between consumers' regular use of the Nutrition Facts label when buying packaged foods and their dietary intakes; and to identify the consumer characteristics associated with regular use of the Nutrition Facts label. An updated understanding of the potential dietary benefits and the consumer characteristics associated with regularly using the Nutrition Facts label can help inform future education campaigns that aim to improve consumers' use of the wide range of nutrition information available on packaged foods.

What Did the Study Find?

NHANES data indicate that from 2017 to March 2020, nearly 8 in 10 adults (79 percent) aged 18 and older reported using Nutrition Facts labels sometimes, most of the time, or always (i.e., they regularly used it) when buying packaged food products. This is significantly higher, by 17 percentage points, than the share of adults who reported regularly using Nutrition Facts labels in 2005–06 (62 percent).

Analyzing the 2005–06, 2007–08, 2009–10, and 2017–March 2020 NHANES data cycles indicated various potential dietary benefits associated with consumers' regular use of Nutrition Facts labels. The author controlled for a diverse set of demographic, socioeconomic, geographic, and interview-related characteristics and found that consumers regularly using Nutrition Facts labels have exhibited a range of healthier dietary intakes. In particular, he found that regular users of Nutrition Facts labels had significantly lower daily intakes of energy (-191 calories),



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fat (-54 calories), saturated fat (-23 calories), alcohol (-26 calories), sugars (-90 calories), and sodium (-112 milligrams) compared with adults who have not regularly used Nutrition Facts labels. Regular Nutrition Facts label users also consumed 0.6 fewer meals per week that were prepared away from home, consumed 0.5 fewer frozen meals/pizzas per month, and spent \$15 less per month on foods prepared away from home.

The analysis also revealed large disparities in the regular use of the Nutrition Facts label and specific types of packaged food label information. The most prominent gaps were those by sex, race and ethnicity, education, income, and geographic area. In 2017–March 2020, regular Nutrition Facts label use was significantly lower among the following:

- Men versus women (13 percentage points);
- Non-Hispanic White consumers versus Hispanic consumers of all races (6 percentage points);
- Adults with less than a high school diploma versus those with 4+ years of college (21 percentage points);
- Lower income households versus higher income households (2 percentage points for every 1-unit difference in the family poverty-to-income ratio); and
- Residents of nonmetropolitan areas versus residents in large metropolitan areas (9 percentage points).

The author observed disparities by sex, race and ethnicity, education, income, and geographic area for specific Nutrition Facts label components. For instance, in 2017–March 2020, regular use of information about calories and serving sizes, which are highlighted on the current Nutrition Facts label version, was found to be significantly lower among the following:

- Men versus women (17 percentage points for calories and 15 percentage points for serving sizes);
- Non-Hispanic White consumers versus Hispanic consumers of all races (5 percentage points for calories);
- Adults with less than a high school diploma versus those with 4+ years of college (20 percentage points for calories);
- Lower income households versus higher income households (2 percentage points for both calories and serving sizes for every 1-unit difference in the family poverty-to-income ratio); and
- Residents of nonmetropolitan areas versus residents in large metropolitan areas (8 percentage points for calories and 6 percentage points for serving sizes).

How Was the Study Conducted?

Data on adults aged 18 and older from a geocoded and date-stamped version of the 2005–06, 2007–08, 2009–10, and 2017–March 2020 NHANES were used to achieve two objectives. First, the author performed a linear regression analysis to quantify associations between regular Nutrition Facts label use when buying packaged foods and dietary intake. To reduce the risk of confounding the associations between regular Nutrition Facts label use and dietary behaviors with other factors, the author estimated associations that were conditional on a diverse set of individual, household, geographic, and interview-related characteristics. Second, the author conducted a probit regression analysis to explore and identify the characteristics that predicted regular Nutrition Facts label use when buying packaged foods.