Children’S Understanding (Or Lack Thereof) of Nutritional Labeling: Finding Ways to Help Kids Make Healthier Food Choices

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Children’s (Mis)understanding of Nutritional Information on Product Packages: Seeking Ways to Help Kids Make Healthier Food Choices

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Abstract
This study examines how much 7 – 12 year old children understand about nutritional information and labeling on food packages. Results of a qualitative examination consisting of focus groups and interviews reveal that kids have limited, but often incorrect, knowledge about nutritional information. They often do not actively search for nutrition labeling information on product packages, but use other package information to cue their understanding of the nutritional value of the food, or they ask others’ opinions of whether they should choose the particular food item. Additionally, the teaching of nutrition information in school is inconsistent and often contradictory.


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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), overweight and obesity has reached epidemic proportions after rising dramatically since the 1970s. Nearly 59 million adults are obese and approximately 9 million young people ages 6-19 are overweight as well (NCCDPHP 2004). The CDC acknowledges that promoting healthy eating, and creating an environment that supports this behavior, is essential to reducing this epidemic of overweight and obesity.

Encouraging people to eat healthier foods requires that basic information about food nutrients and healthy diets is available, and understandable, to consumers. While adults may understand nutritional guidelines but not put them into practice, kids may have difficulty even understanding basic nutritional information that can help them make healthy food choices. The Nutrition Labeling and Education Act of 1990 (NLEA) was implemented by the U.S. government with the goal of providing more complete, useful, and accurate nutrition information that had previously been available on food packages so consumers would have the information needed to make healthy food choices (U.S. Food and Drug Administration 1995). However, despite the increased efforts to provide standardized, accurate information about nutrients in food and nutritional guidelines, the U.S. faces even higher rates of overweight and weight-related health problems than ever before, and public health officials are alarmed at the rapidly rising rate of weight-related health problems in children.

This study examines how much 7–12 year old children understand about nutritional information and labeling on food packages. Previous marketing and developmental psychology research has demonstrated that kids have difficulty understanding information that requires abstract or hypothetical thinking, as much of the nutrition guidelines and information require. We would expect some type of comprehension deficit in kids, but we lack studies that examine the nature of these deficits or how we can provide more appropriate information to kids to guide their food choices.

This study qualitatively explored kids’ knowledge and understanding of nutritional information, and their use of nutritional information appearing on food packages. A snowball sample of 7–12 year olds resulted in four split–gender focus groups (20 children) and ten one-on-one interviews. Focus group participants were shown empty packages from foods commonly consumed by kids their age and were asked to show and talk about the nutritional information on the package. In the interviews, participants were asked questions about their general nutritional knowledge, perceptions, influences, inferences, and decisions.

Results of this study reveal that kids demonstrate wide variance in their levels of nutrition knowledge. This variance is often related to educational situation factors such as where nutrition is taught in the curriculum and whether the child attends public school, private school, or is home schooled. Both nuclear and extended family members appear to have significant influence on children’s nutritional knowledge and the kids often go to a family member who they believe is most knowledgeable for guidance on food choices. Children also are very attentive to parents’ discussions of nutrition, foods, and diets and could identify and discuss extensively the various diets their parents were using. Nutrition information learned at school is often reinforced and validated at home, but mostly through pejorative statements about “fat people” and the relationship between food and disease.

Participants stated that they do not read food package information, unless they are bored while they are already eating, and they do not use package labeling to make food choices. They rely on schema (i.e., “fruits are healthy”) or they ask a parent if they can eat a particular item. They have simple knowledge of basic nutritional markers such as calories and sugar, but express great confusion about the extended information on food labels. They have great difficulty understanding the various types of nutrients listed on nutrition labels and they do not understand % RDA recommendations. When the children could not understand the nutritional label information, they often turn to other visuals on the package and use these as cues for nutritional quality (i.e., pictures of fruit, marshmallows, cartoon characters, or pictures of children on a package).

These findings suggest that marketers, food companies, and health officials need to seek better ways to communicate nutritional information to kids via product packaging. Perhaps the use of a more visually-presented model can do a more effective job of providing information. Additionally, more research is needed to help researchers and health officials understand how kids interpret abstract information such as calories and even serving sizes, in order to provide kids with better tools for managing portion control. There also appears to be a need for attention to mandatory nutrition education standards.

REFERENCES


