College Kids Mostly Blow Off Food-Label Use, Study Finds

By Ruth Kava — June 30, 2016

In the hopes that students will make use of them, many college dining halls post nutrition information near their food selections. The question arises — do the students even notice the labels, and if so, do they use them?

What would be the best placement to get diners’ attention? A recent study [1] in the Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics investigated these questions.

Food economist Dr. Brenna Ellison and colleagues from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, investigated the effect of placement of food nutrition labels on college student choices in four different dining halls at the University. They had students complete one-page surveys while they were eating on three different occasions — four, eight and 12 weeks after the beginning of a semester. In all, over 2,700 students completed the surveys; different students participated on the different occasions. In part, the surveys assessed:

- if the students were aware of the labels
- whether they had taken nutrition classes
- if the students were obese
- their eating habits
- how much students exercised

The authors noted that as young adults (the average age was 19), these students were establishing food patterns that could be life-long, and thus understanding how they might be influenced to make healthy choices could be important to their future health.

Nutrition labels were placed on sneeze guards over foods in two dining halls, and directly in front of foods in two other halls. But the researchers found that there was no difference in either awareness of the labels, or in students’ use of them resulting from the different placements.
About 46 percent of respondents said they were aware of the nutrition labels on the day they were surveyed, and about 20 percent actually used them. On the basis of the survey responses, the researchers found that the factors significantly associated with label awareness and/or use included:

- weight status (higher correlation if respondent was obese)
- the student’s perceived stress level
- having had a college-level nutrition course
- currently tracking food intake
- and exercise frequency — the more frequent the exercise, the greater the label awareness and label use

They also found that over 78 percent of label users preferred having calories on the labels, and over 57 percent wanted to see the amount of fat.

When queried about why they didn't use labels, about 61 percent (826 respondents) of the non-users said they didn't care about them, about 40 percent said they already had a good idea of the information provided, and about 25 percent said they didn’t have time to use them.

Author Ellison noted “I think that the ‘don't-care’ factor is an important finding. We know that 80 percent of the 'don't care' respondents exercised at least once a week, but only 12 percent had taken a college-level nutrition course. So is more education needed? Will it make a difference? Our results suggest promoting other behaviors such as exercise or tracking intake may also encourage label use.”

As in much nutrition research, more questions are raised than answered. The key issue here is motivation — how to increase understanding and appropriate use of nutrition information provided.

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