

Could New Nutrition Labels Help People Avoid Chronic Disease?

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If adopted, the Food and Drug Administration's [update to nutrition labeling](#) could be a big step forward for people living with heart disease and diabetes, and may help others avoid those conditions, experts say.

The Nutrition Facts label, found on most food packages in the United States, was first introduced 20 years ago. Its aim was to help consumers [make informed food choices and maintain healthy dietary practices](#)

"Food labels are critical to making good health decisions," Monique M. Turner said.

Turner is a professor in the department of prevention and community health at George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services in Washington D.C.

She believes nutrition labels do need rethinking, and the FDA proposal is a step in the right direction.

The first proposed update to the labels places more emphasis on total calories, added sugars and certain vitamins and minerals. Total calories and servings per container both get a boost from a bigger font size, while calories from fat disappears altogether. Total fat, saturated and trans fats remain at the top of the nutrient grid.

The FDA also makes a point of embracing how people actually eat, rather than how they should eat. Some packaged foods (like bottled drinks) that people typically eat in one sitting have gotten away with listing multiple serving sizes, even though people typically drink the whole thing at once. Now, packaged food producers must confront more realistic serving sizes.

"We understand that, generally speaking, people pay more attention to the top half of nutrition labels," because that's where the calorie information is," Turner said. "But, it is vital that they understand serving size." Research shows that people with particular health concerns spend more time looking at labels than those only concerned with taste, she noted.

The new label still has a row for grams of total sugar, but includes an additional line for "added sugar." Added sugars, [the FDA advisory notes](#), tend to add calories but no nutritional value to food, and may take the place of more healthy foods in the diet.

["Added sugars from processed foods and beverages contribute to and exacerbate overweight, obesity and chronic illness,"](#) Maya Feller said. Feller, a registered dietician nutritionist, owns Maya Feller Nutrition Inc. in New York City, [which creates individualized meal plans specifically for the management of diet related chronic illnesses.](#)

[Sugar plays a leading role in the high levels of obesity in the U.S., she said.](#)

["By highlighting added sugars on the new label people will see how much they are truly consuming and many will be surprised to learn how much sugar is truly hidden in their favorite foods,"](#) Feller said.

Sugar, especially added sugar, can also play an important role in chronic disease.

["When we look at added sugars and chronic illnesses research has shown that there are significant improvements in health outcomes when people consume a diet low in added sugars,"](#) Feller said. ["Of note, added sugars account for 16](#)

percent of Americans total calorie intake. That's a lot, especially since people are most likely unaware of their consumption of added sugars and their implications.”

Sugar and fat intake are closely tied to [population rates of heart disease and diabetes](#), so the public health implications are clear.

But the proposed new labels also make a point to require a display of potassium and Vitamin D levels. People with [chronic kidney disease or renal failure](#) need to keep a close eye on potassium intake, and the new labels would make that easier. Healthy people should be eating a diet rich in potassium to help stave off high blood pressure, Feller said.

Low Vitamin D levels been definitively linked to osteoporosis and maintained cellular function and may also be associated with heart disease and high blood pressure, [Dr. Edward Giovannucci of the Harvard School of Public Health](#) wrote.

The new label continues to require calcium and iron, important for long term bone health and many anemic conditions, respectively, but Vitamins A and C become optional.

Feller teaches label reading as part of group nutrition education. Often her clients have trouble deciphering the current label, and the new one, if approved, could help fix that, she said.

“In group settings I teach how to make the link between their health- or diet-related chronic illness and the consumption of foods that are high in added fats, sugars and salts,” she said. “If they are able to use the nutrition facts label to make healthier choices there will be a clinically significant improvement.”

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