

Nutrition Labels, What Do They Really Mean?

The Calorie Information Labels Don't Include

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The White House recently released an article announcing proposed revisions to the Nutrition Facts label, which has been significantly updated only once since its initial release twenty years ago. The Nutrition Facts label is found on roughly 700,000 products. The updates announced today support the First Lady's *Let's Move!* initiative in its ongoing efforts to provide parents and families with access to information that helps them make healthier choices.

Do you know how many calories you should be consuming in a day? Most likely not. Studies show that only about 12% of Americans know this number, understand and keep track of the calories they are putting in their body daily. Information like this is not taught in schools or health classes, not on the backs of cereal boxes or soup cans, and that needs to change.

Calories are an issue that are getting increasingly larger and more dangerous due to overconsumption. This calls for a need for more awareness. An issue like this would be greatly improved by better labeling. 48% of consumers said that they often check nutrition labels to make sure they are not eating something they are trying to avoid. But what good will that do if the labels don't provide all the information possible? Among the many ideas being thrown around about how to make the nutrition label more effective, one of them was modifying the information about calories such as "per serving" and "per package" information for foods that could be eaten in just one sitting. It would also include better formatting by emphasizing parts of

the label that are important in addressing current public health concerns to educate and make it easier on consumers. (<https://www.whitehouse.gov>)

Age, gender and how active your life is all take part in how many calories you should consume in a day, so there really is no concrete answer, though there is a range as shown below:

Gender	Age (years)	Sedentary	Moderately Active	Actived
<u>Child</u>	2-3	1,000	1,000-1,400	1,000-1,400
<u>Female</u>	4-8	1,200	1,400-1,600	1,400-1,800
	9-13	1,600	1,600-2,000	1,800-2,200
	14-18	1,800	2,000	2,400
	19-30	2,000	2,000-2,200	2,400
	31-50	1,800	2,000	2,200
	51+	1,600	1,800	2,000-2,200
<u>Male</u>	4-8	1,400	1,400-1,600	1,600-2,000
	9-13	1,800	1,800-2,200	2,000-2,600
	14-18	2,200	2,400-2,800	2,800-3,200
	19-30	2,400	2,600-2,800	3,000
	31-50	2,200	2,400-2,600	2,800-3,000
	51+	2,000	2,200-2,400	2,400-2,800

While it is important for labels to provide more detailed information, it is just as important for consumers to be educated in reading them. One example would be, what are calories? A calorie is a unit of energy, but in our day to day and nutritional language it refers to energy consumption through food and drink and energy usage through physical activity. It is important to not eat or drink more calories than your body will burn off because the excess calories will become stored in fat cells, resulting in weight gain. It will also increase your risk for Type 2 Diabetes, heart disease and cancers. But, that does not mean you should only eat foods

with the lowest amount of calories in order to avoid this. If your calorie count is extremely below the estimated number, it can cause negative health affects on the body such as reduced muscle mass, becoming sluggish, developing nutritional deficiencies and irritability. Doesn't this seem concerning? In addition, different amounts on nutritional labels mean different things. For example, if the food has around 40 calories that is a low amount, if it has around 100 calories that is moderate and if it has 400 or more that is very high. (<http://www.fda.gov/>) It is important to pay attention to these numbers in order to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

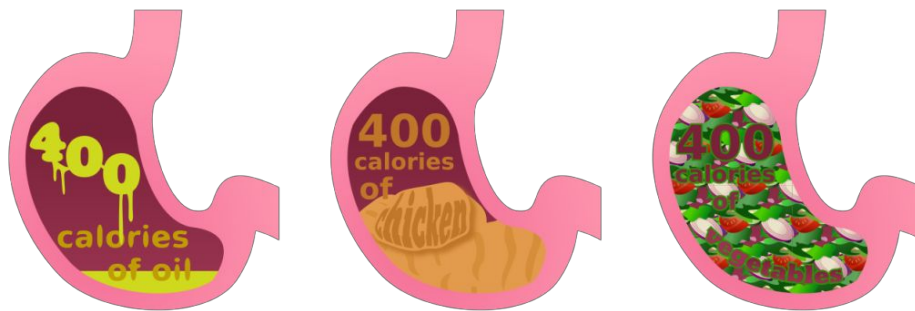
This is a comparison image of a person with average weight (consuming the required number of calories)



and a person above average weight, or obese (consumed more calories than is burning)

Many Americans eat and drink foods and beverages that contain “empty calories”, or calories made from solid fats or added sugars. These foods, such as cakes, cookies, donuts, energy drinks, sodas, cheese, ice cream, pizza, sausage, ribs, bacon and many more, have lots of

calories in them but little to no nutritional value. (<http://www.choosemyplate.gov/>) Because of this, you do not feel full after eating them and in turn eat more food to try and fill up. This creates a chain reaction of more food and excess calories, a large reason for weight gain and increasing obesity. Companies need to realize the potential danger they're putting their customers in by not labeling or telling them about these empty calories. It takes 3500 calories to gain one pound, those calories should be ones that will fill us up. So, what we should be eating are nutrient dense foods. Nutrient dense foods have many nutrients but few calories. These foods, ones such as potatoes, bananas, soy beans, mangoes, cashews, mushrooms, tomatoes, quinoa, brown rice and many more, contain things such as vitamins, minerals, complex



carbohydrates, lean proteins and healthy fats.

(picture from nutritioneducationstore.com)

Why don't we make it easier to figure out which foods are which? Instead of just labeling a food stating however many calories it contains, labels should also include whether the food contains many empty calories or is nutrient dense. This would give curious consumers an idea of what they're putting in their bodies before they put it in their mouths. In the last twenty years portion sizes have grown so much that plates of food often have enough to feed two or three people. (<http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/>)

As a relatively healthy teenage girl, I know I had no idea about any of this. I see a calorie amount on my food labels and don't know how much or how little that amount will affect me, if I even look at in general. Labels are so full of information that it is hard to just focus on one aspect of them. I think that not only I but everyone would benefit from making labels easier to read and more understandable for consumers of any age. In fact, according to the FDA, "Many Americans consume more calories than they need without meeting recommended intakes for a number of nutrients". In most cases, people don't know what to change about their calorie intake unless they have consulted a doctor. We need to make it easier than that.

Many companies may argue that modifying the labels will not stop consumers from purchasing these items. I will admit, this may be true for some. But there are still many people out there looking to change their ways as well as younger generations who we could help to grow up living healthy lifestyles. It will also make food sellers, restaurants and grocery stores, etc., responsible for knowing how many calories are in the food they are selling. Not only are we educating consumers but suppliers as well.

If you are looking to change your ways and have a healthier lifestyle, then you should be able to look straight onto the label of your foods and find out what are the different amounts you can eat depending on who you are, whether you're male, female, child, or have any health complications. In the article talked about above, our first lady Michelle Obama says, "Our guiding principle here is very simple: that you as a parent and a consumer should be able to walk into your local grocery store, pick up an item off the shelf, and be able to tell whether it's good for your family,". The more educated consumers can be about food and the effects they have on

their bodies, the more informed decisions they can make. By doing this we also create the potential for a much healthier society.