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Do Consumers Want to Know How Much Added Sugars Is in Their Food?

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The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recently updated the standard nutrition facts panel we see on packaged foods and beverages. Many of the changes were aesthetic in nature such as increasing the font size for the serving size and number of calories, but there were also some changes to the panel in terms of the types of nutrition information reported. One of the more notable changes was the inclusion of added sugars as a component of total sugars. Sugars can be naturally-occurring (e.g., sugars in fresh fruit) or added during processing or preparation. Common examples of added sugars include sucrose, high fructose corn syrup, brown sugar, and honey (FDA 2020).

Previously, the nutrition facts panel did not distinguish between naturally-occurring and added sugars. Nutrition advocates argued the added sugars content needed to be separately disclosed because U.S. consumers exceed the recommended intake of added sugars (U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). However, there are questions as to how consumers will respond to the disclosure of the new added sugars information. For example, do consumers even want this information at all? Research has shown that some consumers may actively avoid nutrition information (Sweeny et al., 2010; Thunström et al., 2016; Golman, Hagmann, and Loewenstein, 2017; Thunström 2019). It is unclear whether such avoidance behavior will apply to added sugars.

In this article, I present results from a recently published study (Kim et al., 2021) with Elizabeth Kim (ACE Ph.D. alumna), Brandon McFadden (Applied Economics and Statistics, University of Delaware), and Melissa Pflugh Prescott (Food Science and Human Nutrition, UIUC). In the study, we investigated whether consumers wanted to access or avoid the added sugars information on the nutrition facts panel when purchasing food products. We consider two factors that may influence a consumer's decision to access or avoid the information: 1) consumers' knowledge and understanding of added sugars; and 2) product type.

Sample and Study Design

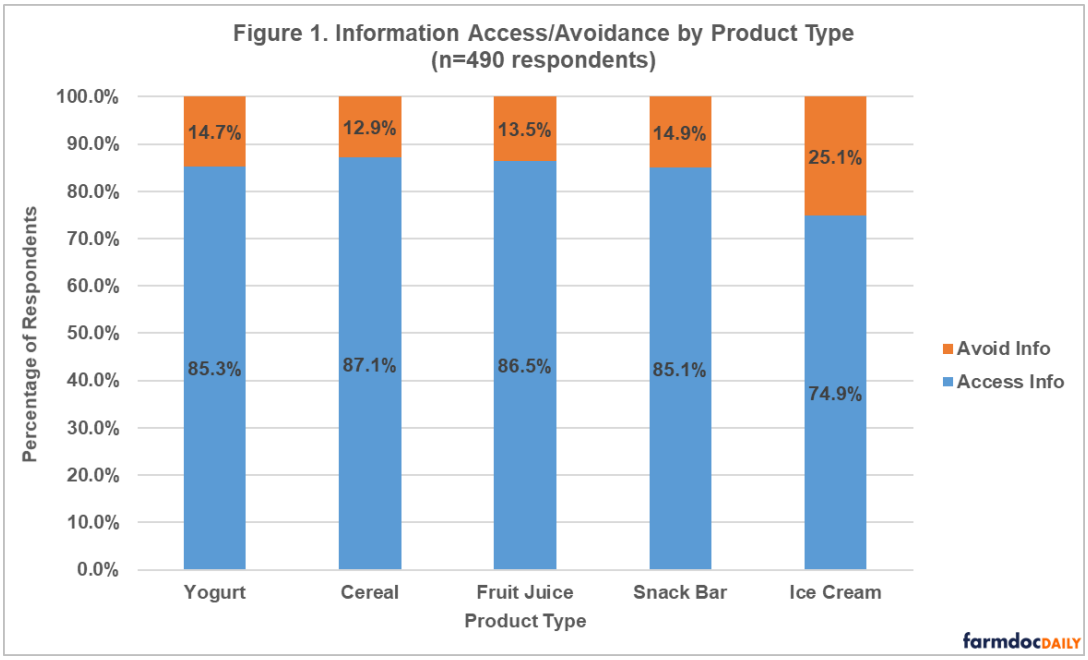
This study was conducted in Spring 2020. We recruited approximately 500 respondents to participate in an online survey. In the survey, participants were randomized into one of two information treatments. The simple information treatment informed respondents that the nutrition facts panel now included the added sugars content and provided an example of how the new information was presented on the panel. The full information treatment provided additional information such as the definition of added sugars, the daily recommended added sugars intake, example foods that had added sugars, diseases associated with overconsumption of added sugars, and how to interpret the new information. We expected that respondents who received the full information treatment would be more likely to access the added sugars information.

After the information treatment, respondents were told they would complete a series of purchasing tasks for five types of products (yogurt, cereal, fruit juice, snack bar, and ice cream). For each product type, respondents were given the option to access or avoid the added sugars information when completing the purchasing tasks. We hypothesized that respondents would be more likely to avoid the added sugars information for high-sugar products (e.g., ice cream), as the information might cause guilt or reduce the overall enjoyment of the product.

Once respondents made their information access/avoidance decisions, they were asked to rate their likelihood of purchase (rated on a scale from 1 to 7 where 1=Not at all likely and 7=Extremely likely) for 10 products. Two products were shown for each of the five product categories, one product with a low level of added sugars and one product with a high level of added sugars.

Summary of Results

Figure 1 shows the percentage of consumers who chose to access or avoid the added sugars information for each product category. We did not find significant differences based on the information treatment, so the results are combined in the figure.



The figure shows that, across all product categories, a large majority of respondents indicated they would prefer to access the added sugars information. Consumers were significantly more likely to avoid the added sugars information on ice cream, which supported our hypothesis.

Overall, rates of information access in this study were much higher than rates of access in a previous study on calorie information (Thunström et al., 2016). One reason for this could be that the calorie information study was conducted in a restaurant setting. In this case, consumers may view eating at a restaurant as a 'treat' and thus may prioritize taste over nutrition considerations. Our experiment asked about products that are more likely to be consumed at home, which may change respondents' interest in nutritional information.

We also compared likelihood of purchase ratings for information accessors and information avoiders. Typically, respondents who chose to access the added sugars information indicated significantly higher likelihood of purchase ratings for the healthier (lower added sugars) products. Conversely, those who chose to avoid the information were more likely to purchase the products with high added sugars. This finding is also consistent with previous work by Thunström et al. (2016) who found that diners who chose to avoid calorie information had higher calorie intake.

Conclusion

The nutrition facts panel was recently updated to include information on added sugars in an effort to improve the healthfulness of food choices. For that goal to be realized, consumers must choose to look at and use the information. Our results revealed that the majority of respondents were interested in accessing the added sugars information, and they exhibited healthier purchasing behaviors than those respondents who chose to avoid the information. Therefore, it is critical to promote that this new information is available to consumers. For high-sugar products like ice cream, consumers may be more likely to skip the added sugars information. In these cases, focusing on portion control strategies may be more effective at promoting healthy eating behaviors.

For a full copy of this study, visit: https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0249355

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