Help patients understand Nutrition Facts labels to eat smarter

FEB 9, 2022

Sara Berg, MS
Senior News Writer

Nearly half of American adults put on weight during the first year of the pandemic, according to survey research published in January in the journal *Diabetes & Metabolic Syndrome: Clinical Research & Reviews*, with depression and anxiety being strong predictors weight gain amid the strains of COVID-19.

The pandemic has undoubtedly amplified the need to make chronic disease prevention a priority. This often begins with making healthy food choices, as difficult as that may be given the unprecedented and seemingly unrelenting stressors patients are facing daily. One small but important way for patients to make key decisions that have a lasting impact on their health is by consulting the Nutrition Facts label on food and beverage packages.

However, patients often have difficulty understanding the information listed and what it means for making informed food choices. Physicians and other health professionals can learn to effectively educate patients on how to read and understand Nutrition Facts labels through four educational videos.

The AMA has developed the continuing medical education module, “Talking to Patients About Using the Nutrition Facts Label to Make Healthy Food Choices” in collaboration with the Food and Drug Administration.

“An easy way for patients to make healthier food choices is by referencing the Nutrition Facts label found on food and beverage packages,” according to AMA Immediate Past President Susan R. Bailey, MD. The videos “provide a variety of strategies that physicians can easily incorporate into their workflow to help guide patients on how to make food choices that will have a lasting, positive impact on their health.”

“We know that poor diet can lead to obesity, which is linked to a number of life-threatening conditions such as heart disease, stroke and diabetes, and that underlying conditions can place people at increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19,” said Dr. Bailey. “The AMA is committed to improving
the health of the nation by leading the charge to prevent and reduce the burden of chronic disease, like cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes, to ensure patients live richer and fuller lives.”

Additionally, there is “the issue of disparity and the availability of food in many of our communities,” said Willarda V. Edwards, MD, MBA, a member of the AMA Board of Trustees, who narrates the videos. “When we’re talking to our patients that are living in food swamps and food deserts, it’s really important that we talk to them about nutrition because what may be available to them in their neighborhoods could give them more nutrition if they knew what to look for.”

“We need to give them more green spaces, and more places to make vegetables and fruits more available,” said Dr. Edwards. But “when you don’t have that—or if you have it in a spare amount—then it’s all the more reason to know that what you’re buying can be nutritious or that what you have available is not nutritious, so you know the difference.”

The videos boost physicians’ knowledge of the Nutrition Facts label and provide practical strategies for discussing the label with their patients, better equipping them to offer guidance that supports eating habits that can prevent type 2 diabetes, hypertension and more.

1 “Understanding Servings, Calories and Percent Daily Value on the Nutrition Label.”
While most patients understand basics of nutrition, it can be hard to achieve a balanced diet without reading the nutrition labels of products. In this video, Dr. Edwards will review the regulation of the Nutrition Facts label and three key sections of the label: servings, calories, and percent Daily Value. When choosing and comparing packaged foods and beverages, the Nutrition Facts label can help patients make informed decisions that can have positive effects on their long-term health.

2 “Nutrient Overview and Nutrients to Get More Of.”
It can be hard to get the proper amount of certain nutrients. This video provides an overview of the nutrients listed on the Nutrition Facts label and discusses the nutrients that are important for patients to get more of. Additionally, many Americans do not get the recommended amount of certain nutrients in their diets: dietary fiber, calcium, vitamin D, potassium and iron. The video also reviews the health benefits of these nutrients and provides tips for patients to include foods with more of these nutrients in their diets.
“Nutrients to Get Less Of.”
Most Americans exceed the recommended limits for certain nutrients in their diets: saturated fat, sodium and added sugars. This video reviews how the Nutrition Facts label can help patients compare and choose foods and beverages lower in these nutrients, which can help reduce their risk of developing some health conditions.

“Understanding the Nutrition Facts Label and How Do I Use It?”
Some patients may want more guidance on how to approach nutrition labels while grocery shopping. This video provides a general overview of the four key sections of the Nutrition Facts label: servings, calories, percent Daily Value and nutrients. The video offers practical guidance for patients on how to use the Nutrition Facts label to compare packaged foods and beverages and make informed dietary choices. It is designed to help physicians and other health care professionals educate patients and can also be shared directly with patients.

“Understanding the Nutrition Facts label is very important in this time that we're in right now—when we're talking about people being at home more and then recognizing that they need to be prudent in what they purchase, what they eat and what is available to them,” said Dr. Edwards. “Then the fact that they need more access to nutritious foods, and that’s where we, as the AMA and as their physicians, would want to be an advocate for them.

“If they don’t have grocery stores in their area or they don’t have people that are providing good food for them and access to those foods, we can help,” she added.

The CME course, “Talking to Patients About Using the Nutrition Facts Label to Make Healthy Food Choices,” is enduring material and designated by the AMA for a maximum of 1 AMA PRA Category 1 Credit™.

The Nutrition Facts label modules are part of the AMA Ed Hub™, an online learning platform that brings together high-quality CME, maintenance of certification, and educational content from trusted sources, all in one place—with activities relevant to you, automated credit tracking and reporting for some states and specialty boards.
Learn more about AMA CME accreditation.