

# Study to examine impact of nutrition rating systems on parental demand for children's beverages

Childhood obesity has dramatically increased over the past 40 years, partly because of increased consumption of calorically sweetened beverages. Parents buy most of the beverages their children drink, and the majority of these beverages are consumed by children at home. To promote the selection of healthier foods and beverages, the Institute of Medicine recommends implementation of a uniform front-of-package rating system, which would summarize complicated nutrition information into an overall assessment of product healthfulness.

Many rating systems have been proposed, however, and there is little consensus on which rating system would be most effective. Rating systems on food labels have created consumer confusion in recent years, as the food industry has created their own controversial rating systems, and some grocery stores have developed their own methods of rating foods.

Dr. Christine Blake, a researcher from the Arnold School of Public Health, received a seed grant from the Center for Research in Nutrition and Health Disparities to study the impact of nutrition rating systems presented as front-of-package labels on parental demand for children's beverages.

"Right now, there is debate whether the US government will use a standardized rating system on food labels, so the public can make informed decisions about the nutritional value of the foods they buy. Most consumers are confused by the current nutrition labels. We were particularly interested in beverages as a product category to examine because of implications for obesity, especially among children and adolescents," Blake said.

Dr. James Thrasher, Arnold School researcher and co-principal investigator of the current study, has experience evaluating impacts of warning labels on consumer perceptions and demand for cigarettes. The current research expands on his work to understand the impacts of rating systems on beverage labels.

Thrasher said, "Beverages are similar to cigarettes because there are some beverages that clearly do not have any nutritional value and have negative health consequences. In general, product packaging is a potentially powerful, but low-cost medium for communicating with consumers, especially if health messages on packaging are prominent, clear, and allow consumers to compare the healthfulness of similar products."

Blake and Thrasher, along with Matthew Rousu from Susquehanna University in Pennsylvania are working together to develop and test experiments that assess demand for beverages under different front-of-package labeling conditions.

Blake said, "We want to test if rating systems on beverage labels change the demand for healthier versus unhealthier products. So did the participants notice the label? How did the rating system on the label influence their decision making process to purchase the beverage?"

## Key Points

- A front-of-package rating system on food and beverage products summarizes nutrition information for consumers.
- This study will test if rating systems on beverage labels change the demand for healthier versus unhealthier products.
- Information gained from this study can be applied to other food products to inform the public of the nutritional value of the food they consume.

They are also interested in whether explaining the rating system or attributing the rating system to either government or industry influences the amount parents are willing to pay for healthier and unhealthier beverages.

“The product category happens to be beverages, but the information gained from this study can be applied to any other food product that will help keep the public informed of the nutritional value of the food they consume,” said Blake.

The research funded by this seed grant will be used to demonstrate the feasibility of participant recruitment strategies and experimental methods included in a resubmission of a previously scored NIH R21 proposal.