FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Study Finds Sugary Drink Warning Labels Three Times More Effective at Decreasing Purchases Than Industry's Calorie Labels

DAVIS, CA., January 14, 2016 ... Parents who see warning labels on sugary drinks – like those being considered in California and New York – are much less likely to purchase sodas, sports drinks and other sugar-sweetened beverages, according to a study published today in the journal “Pediatrics” and conducted by researchers at Harvard University, the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Waterloo.

“Warning labels may be an important and impactful way to educate parents about the health harms of sugary drinks and encourage them to purchase fewer sugary drinks for their kids,” says Dr. Christina A. Roberto, lead study author and assistant professor of Medical Ethics & Health Policy at the Perelman School of Medicine, University of Pennsylvania. “In our study of over 2,000 participants in a simulated purchasing environment, warning labels on sugary drinks had a dramatic impact on parents’ choices.”

That’s good news for policymakers around the nation who are considering warning labels as a means of reducing sugary beverage consumption, which the preponderance of scientific studies identify as a leading and direct contributor to type 2 diabetes, obesity and tooth decay.

Large, Robust Study Surveys 2,000+ Parents

Researchers at the three universities recruited 2,381 parents to participate in an online shopping experience. The researchers then assigned the parents to one of three groups: a control group for whom sweetened beverages displayed no special label; a second group for which sweetened beverages displayed the American Beverage Association’s voluntary “Clear on Calories” label of calories per bottle or can; and a third group for which sweetened beverages displayed a warning label. Parents were then asked to select one beverage for their child from a simulated vending machine containing a variety of drinks, sweetened and unsweetened.

The warning labels were found to be about three times as effective in convincing parents to select a healthier beverage as the “Clear on Calories” label. Compared to the control group, the warning label reduced the number of parents who chose a sugary drink by 34 percent, versus a decline of just 12 percent for the industry’s current alternative. In addition, the researchers found similar reactions from parents of varying educational backgrounds, suggesting that all parents read and consider labels, not just the most educated.

The authors also tested four slightly different phrasings of the warning label and found the verbiage presently proposed in California’s legislation (SB 203) to be the most effective: “SAFETY WARNING: Drinking beverages with added sugar(s) contributes to obesity, diabetes, and tooth decay.”
Overwhelming Parental Support for Warning Label

After completing the purchasing simulation, parents were asked about their beliefs regarding sugary drinks. 73 percent of all participants – including two-thirds majorities of Democrats, Republicans and Independents – stated that they would support legislation requiring a warning label on sugary drinks. Only five percent opposed the policy.

“This study confirms that warning labels provide consumers with the scientific information they need to make informed purchasing decisions,” says Dr. Harold Goldstein, executive director of the California Center for Public Health Advocacy. “Without this information, many parents unknowingly buy their children products that are contributors to type 2 diabetes, obesity and other life-shortening chronic diseases. The beverage industry’s voluntary labels may be clear about calorie content, but they say nothing about the proven dangers of high-sugar beverages like sodas, sweet teas, and sports, energy and fruit drinks.”

“The Influence of Sugar-Sweetened Beverage Health Warning Labels on Parents’ Choices” was published online today in “Pediatrics,” the official journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics. The study was funded by the Healthy Eating Research Program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

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California Center for Public Health Advocacy (CCPHA) is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization at the forefront of solving the obesity and diabetes epidemics.

**EDITOR’S NOTE:** Links to the full study, fact sheets and additional spokespersons are available at www.sodawarninglabel.org.
The Influence of Sugar-Sweetened Beverage Health Warning Labels

ON PARENTS’ CHOICES AND KNOWLEDGE

WHAT

Proposed sugary drink warning labels work. According to a new study from the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard and University of Waterloo, parents are less likely to choose sugary drinks for their children when these products include warning labels. The study, published in the latest edition of Pediatrics, surveyed 2,000+ parents and found a marked decrease in purchases when warning labels were displayed — three times the decrease found with the beverage industry’s voluntary “Clear on Calories” labels.

WHY

Liquid sugar, like that in sodas, sports and energy drinks, and sweet teas, is a unique driver of today’s skyrocketing type II diabetes and obesity epidemics. Type two diabetes rates have nearly tripled over the past 30 years, as sugary drink consumption has doubled. Two out of five U.S. adults, and 1 out of 3 children, are now expected to develop diabetes during their lifetime. Two-thirds of U.S. adults and one-third of youth are overweight or obese, leading to higher incidences of heart disease, cancer and asthma. Warning labels on sugary drinks will provide at-a-glance information to help consumers make healthier, more informed purchasing decisions for themselves and their children.

HOW

This study of a demographically diverse national sample of 2,381 parents compared purchases and consumer knowledge in a virtual sales environment in which sugary drinks had a health warning label, a calorie label or no label at all.

WHO

The study was conducted by researchers from the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and University of Waterloo. It was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Healthy Eating Research Program.

KEY FINDINGS

• Parents are significantly less likely to choose a sugary drink for their children when the bottle has a health warning label (40 percent) compared to no label at all (60 percent).

• Health warning labels are three times more effective as calorie count labels at decreasing parents’ purchases of sugary drinks. That’s a 34 percent reduction compared to only a 12 percent reduction with the industry’s label.

• Warning labels improve parents’ understanding of the harmful health effects associated with overconsumption of sugary drinks.

• The majority of parents surveyed (73 percent) are in favor of warning labels for sugary drinks.

• Warning labels had strong majority support across all political parties, indicating that warning labels are unlikely to be met with strong opposition from voters.
The Influence of Sugar-Sweetened Beverage Health Warning Labels on Parents’ Choices and Knowledge

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THE CALIFORNIA CENTER FOR PUBLIC HEALTH ADVOCACY (CCPHA) is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization at the forefront of solving the obesity and diabetes epidemics by advocating for policies that build a healthier California. CCPHA was founded in 1999 by the California Public Health Association-North and the Southern California Public Health Association. For more information, visit www.publichealthadvocacy.org.