



American Heart Association®

Hard Hats with Heart™



Toolbox Talks

Sugar-Free vs. No Added Sugar

Making Sense of Sugar Claims on Packaging

Food packages often include statements about health benefits or nutritional quality separate from the required Nutrition Facts label. You may be wondering how to make sense of it all. Are these products healthier? Should you eat more of them?

The answer: It's complicated. Especially when it comes to sugar content claims.

What do sugar content claims mean?

According to the FDA, nutrient content claims describe the level of a nutrient (such as sugar) in the product using terms such as “free” and “low” or compare the level of a nutrient in a product to that of another product using terms such as “reduced” and “less.” For example:

- **Sugar Free:** One serving* contains less than 0.5 grams of sugars, both natural and added. (Also: free of sugar, sugarless, no sugar, zero sugar, or trivial source of sugar.)
- **Reduced Sugar:** Has at least 25% less sugars than the regular version of the product. (Also: less sugar, low in sugar or lower sugar.)
- **No Added Sugar:** No sugar or ingredient containing sugar was added during processing or packaging. (Also: without added sugar or no sugar added.)

Products with sugar claims often contain a sugar substitute or low-calorie sweetener. This is how they can contain less sugars but maintain the sweetness expected in the food or drink.

But just because a product has a sugar content claim doesn't mean it's good for you. For example, a sugary breakfast cereal can claim it has “reduced sugar” (reduced from what?) or that it's “lightly sweetened” (a meaningless, unregulated term). This can fool health-conscious shoppers into thinking it's a better choice.

Researchers in one study were surprised to find that some products with low-nutrient claims actually had more of that nutrient than products without those claims. Or a product might have less of one unhealthy nutrient but too much of another — meaning overall, it's not a better choice. The researchers concluded that it can be misleading to make a decision about a product based on a package claim.

Frequently Asked Questions:

How do I make healthier choices?

When you see a sugar content claim on a product, use information on the Nutrition Facts label and ingredients list to make sure it's a healthier choice.

Discussion Questions:

- Have you ever picked one product over another based on a package claim? Did you check the labels to compare?