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**YOUNG ADOLESCENTS GIVE THEMSELVES GOOD GRADES FOR
NUTRITION LABEL KNOWLEDGE
But They Actually Know Little or Do Not Care About Important Nutrition Facts**

Denver, CO (February 9, 2005) – Recent research fielded by the United States Potato Board (USPB) found that the gap between actual and perceived nutrition knowledge among American adolescents is wide and could be compromising their food choices. This is particularly true when it comes to the official FDA Nutrition Facts Label; many young adolescents view them as not only confusing but irrelevant to their lives.

In a national poll of 400 12-14 year olds, two-thirds of survey respondents assigned themselves a grade of “A” or “B” for understanding and applying the information on nutrition labels. Yet, when asked “If you wanted to eat healthier or more nutritious meals, which one of the following sources would be most helpful to you?” only 19% answered “The nutrition labels on foods.” When probed further, respondents didn’t know the benefits of or major food sources of important nutrients like vitamin C or carbohydrates. Specific amounts of these basic food components are listed on every food nutrition label in America.

USPB focus groups conducted with young adolescents shed light on specific elements of nutrition labels that are considered to be confusing. Few participants understood the meaning of “daily value,” a concept that’s essential to making sense of the label. One participant said, “I read nutrition labels when I’m bored and it’s sitting in front of me, but I don’t know what they mean.” Another quipped, “I haven’t a clue what a daily value is, but that’s okay because I don’t care.”

This laissez-faire attitude towards nutrition was echoed in the national survey. A large portion of young adolescents polled stated that they “do not care” about the carbohydrates (49%), calories (46%), potassium (42%), or sodium (41%) they obtain from the foods they eat.

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They should care; especially since, according to the 2002 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control (NCHS/CDC), 16 percent of 12-19 year olds in this country are overweight, while another 15 percent are "at risk" for becoming overweight. "At a time in life when personal control over nutrition choices is beginning, adolescents need to know how to use tools like nutrition facts labels to help them make wise food choices," explains Linda McCashion, vice president of public relations for the USPB. "And they need to know why it's important in a way that's relevant to them by linking consequences of a poor diet to problems kids would face in the present – not as adults. For instance, if kids have poor eating habits and become overweight, this can impact their friendships, disrupt sleep patterns and make it hard to breathe."

Students Stumped on Produce Quiz

The lack of nutrition knowledge is clearly demonstrated by these young adolescents' opinions about two common foods: potatoes and bananas. Even though potatoes were one of the first produce items to carry a nutrition label and are a favorite food of young adolescents, most survey respondents gave incorrect answers when asked about six attributes of potato nutrition: calories, fat, carbohydrates, potassium, vitamin C, and sodium. They vastly underestimated the positive nutrition value of the potato.

When compared to a banana, a food that's widely considered to be healthy, 87 percent of respondents were unaware that a potato contained more potassium (720 mg per serving of potato versus 400 mg per serving of banana). There were more misperceptions: 76 percent believed that a potato contained more calories than a banana when, in fact, a medium potato contains 100 calories versus a banana's 110. A whopping 87 percent thought a banana was a better source of vitamin C; in truth, a medium potato contains 45 percent of the recommended daily value for this essential nutrient, a banana has 15 percent.

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During a similar potato-banana comparison exercise conducted during the focus group sessions, one participant said, “I thought only fruits had vitamin C in them” and another exclaimed, “Wow! We need to respect the spud!”

“These youngsters were very surprised that the potatoes they love are full of essential vitamins and minerals,” comments McCashion. “If they were more comfortable with FDA nutrition labels, these young adolescents might make wiser nutrition choices.”

The USPB aims to do just that. Nutrition experts worked with educators at Scholastic, the global children’s publishing and media company, to create a nutrition label education unit that is featured in the January/February 2005 issue of *Instructor* magazine. The unit features a poster-size nutrition label with a headline that reads: “Dig This! Read the Label: It’s Good for Your Body.”

“Young adolescents might be motivated by how the nutrients in foods can help them look good and perform better in sports,” states registered dietitian Katherine Beals, Ph.D., nutrition consultant to the USPB. “Potatoes meet both of those criteria. They are an excellent source of vitamin C so we explain this will keep their gums in good condition and help maintain a healthy smile. The complex carbohydrates in potatoes provide the energy required by the brain during the school day and the muscles for after school sports. Finally, potatoes are an excellent source of potassium, a key mineral involved in muscle contraction and, thus, important for sports performance.”

The USPB is also creating healthy potato recipes for school foodservice directors, to show them that there is delicious potato life beyond the fryer. Foodservice professionals can obtain free copies of the recipes by visiting www.healthypotato.com.

The Ultimate Nutrition Authority: Moms

The USPB survey also found that moms are the primary gatekeepers for adolescents’ nutrition information. Almost one respondent out of three (31 percent) picked “mom” as the source that would be most helpful to them if they wanted to eat healthier and more nutritious meals.

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“When mom isn’t around, their children need to know how to read and understand nutrition labels so they can make smart choices for themselves,” says Beals. The USPB/Scholastic nutrition label lesson plan includes a parent-student activity to facilitate this learning. To download a free copy of the entire kit, visit www.healthypotato.com and click on *Scholastic Poster for the Classroom*. The unit may be duplicated for classroom use.

“While visiting the website, be sure to download some of the healthy potato recipes,” offers Beals. “There are so many nutritious ways to prepare potatoes. Moms can use them as a tried-and-true base for introducing other vegetables into meals. It’s easy to top a baked potato with broccoli and cheese, or add spinach to mashed potatoes.”

About the USPB

In 2004, the USPB introduced a major consumer education program in response to the food confusion sweeping the nation. *The Healthy Potato* campaign launched with print and radio advertising, a partnership with Weight Watchers International, Inc., a new consumer Web site, www.healthypotato.com, *The Healthy Potato* consumer brochure with innovative healthy potato recipes, and endorsements by leading nutrition experts. As a result, the FDA potato nutrition label has reached the eyes of millions of Americans increasing the awareness and understanding of the positive nutrition benefits of potatoes.

The USPB was established in 1971 by a group of potato growers to promote the benefits of eating potatoes. Recognized as an innovator in the produce marketing industry, the USPB was one of the first commodity groups to develop and use a nutrition label that was approved by the USDA and FDA. Headquartered in Denver, Colorado, the USPB represents more than 6,000 potato growers and handlers across the country.

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