

European consumers and nutrition labelling

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Nutrition labelling of food in Europe is not compulsory, unless a nutrition or health claim is made for the product. The European Commission is proposing mandatory nutrition labelling, even front of pack labelling with nutrition information. Yet, how widespread is nutrition labelling in the EU, and are consumers using the information? Can they understand it, use it to identify the healthier choice, and is it exerting an effect on their food purchasing? This review looks at two European studies conducted by the European Food Information Council (EUFIC).

Penetration of nutrition information on food labels

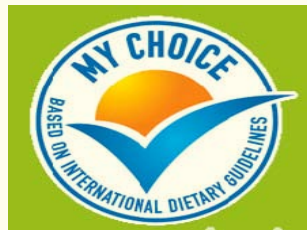
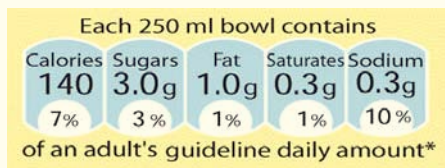
The EU-funded project FLABEL (Food Labelling to Advance Better Education for Life), which commenced in August 2008, and in which EUFIC is a partner (and coordinator), studied the penetration of nutrition labelling on food. Whereas nutrition information in the form of a nutrition

table or in linear format on the back of food packages has been provided for some time, various front-of-pack nutrition labelling schemes have emerged more recently, such as the traffic-light scheme, guideline daily amounts (GDA) or health logos.

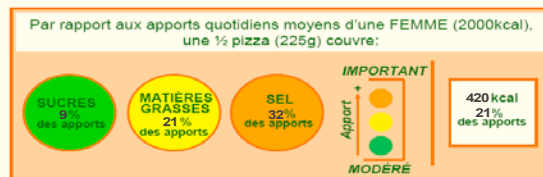
From September 2008 to April 2009, more than 37,000 products in five food

and beverage product categories (sweet biscuits, breakfast cereals, pre-packed chilled ready meals, carbonated soft drinks and yoghurts) have been audited in a total of 84 retail stores across the 27 EU Member States and Turkey.

The first results from this study have shown that, on average, 85% (range: 70%, Slovenia - 97%, Ireland) of the products audited included back-of-pack (BOP) nutrition information versus 48% (range: 24%, Turkey - 82%, UK) front-of-pack (FOP) nutrition information. The most widespread format was the tabular or linear listing of the big four (calories, protein, carbohydrates, fat) or the big eight (big four, plus sugar, saturated fat, fibre and sodium) on the back of the pack. Nutrition claims and GDA were the most prevalent forms of nutrition information on the front of the pack, averaging 25% each. Among the five categories of products audited, breakfast cereals showed the highest penetration of nutrition information, with 94% for BOP and 70% for FOP. Consequently, nutrition



Per pack		
MED	Fat	16.0g
HIGH	Saturates	10.0g
MED	Salt	1.4g
LOW	Sugars	4.2g
		Calories 438



Examples of different nutrition labelling symbols and systems used in Europe.

information seems to be widely available on food products in Europe, despite the fact that its provision is voluntary if there are no nutrition or health claims on the product.

European consumers and nutrition

Another study, by EUFIC in collaboration with Professor Klaus Grunert, University of Aarhus, Denmark, was designed to assess consumers' knowledge of nutrition, as well as their use of nutrition labelling when choosing products in a store. The study was carried out in six countries (UK, Germany, Poland, Hungary, France, Sweden) from February 2008 to February 2009, and consisted of three parts:

- 1) Observing shoppers' behaviour during their product choice at the supermarket aisle;
- 2) An interview in the store to ascertain the information for which they had looked and where on the label they had found it;
- 3) A questionnaire to fill in at home and return, looking at use and understanding of nutrition information and knowledge of nutrition.

More than 11,700 in-store interviews were carried out and 6,000 of these participants returned the at-home questionnaire.

Nutrition knowledge

Respondents had a reasonably good knowledge of nutrition, with the most positive answers coming from the UK. They knew they should eat lots of fruits and vegetables, but few knew that eating a lot of starchy foods (such as bread, rice, pasta and potatoes) is recommended. Many consumers believed that foods high in fat, sugar and salt should be avoided, rather than that intake should be restricted. More than a third of respondents tended to overestimate children's calorie needs, thinking they needed more calories than an adult male – a point worth considering as we continue to address childhood obesity. There is confusion concerning the different types of fat, with the health implications of saturated fat, trans fat and omega-3 consumption being fairly well understood, whereas polyunsaturated fatty acids are less familiar.

Labelling awareness, understanding and ability to make health inferences

Most consumers were aware of the major nutrition labelling schemes found in the supermarket in which they shopped. About 60% (range: 40%, Sweden - 90%, UK) of respondents reported having seen

a GDA label before. In Sweden, the keyhole logo achieved an overall consumer awareness of over 95%. In the UK, most of the respondents were also aware of the traffic-light system (79%). Among the various systems, consumers looked mostly at the nutrition table and GDA for nutrition information.

When focusing on objective understanding, the meaning of the keyhole logo was broadly understood by the respondents in Sweden. However, colour-coded systems were often misinterpreted by consumers in the UK and France. Most respondents in both countries (73% in the UK, 63% in France) exaggerated the meaning of the highest nutrient levels (red in the UK, orange in France). The UK consumers wrongly believed that the red colour meant they "should try not to eat this product", while the correct definition is "It's fine to eat this product occasionally as a treat."

A majority of consumers (between 66% and 88%) in all six countries could correctly use the labelling system to identify the healthier option between different products within the same category regardless of the labelling system provided.

Consumers' awareness, understanding and ability to make correct health inferences are linked to their knowledge of nutrition, age, social class and interest in healthy eating. These results suggest that improving consumers' knowledge of nutrition could help them interpret nutrition labelling correctly.

Consumers' actual use of nutrition labelling

Most respondents were able to use nutrition information when prompted, but do they use it when shopping? In the EUFIC study, consumers were recruited in supermarkets after they had just chosen a product (from one of the six different product categories). Fewer than one-third of consumers had looked for nutrition information on these packs (range: 9% France to 27% UK).

The main indicators used to infer healthiness were calories and fat. Salt was only a major concern for consumers in the UK. Nutrition information was mainly drawn from the nutrition table or GDA information, especially in the UK, France and Germany. Of the six product categories considered, respondents spent the most time handling ready meals, but were most likely to look for nutrition information on yoghurts and breakfast cereals.

Conclusion

The penetration of nutrition labelling in Europe is high. The majority of consumers have a reasonable knowledge of nutrition and are able to use nutrition information to identify a healthier product. But only a minority actually looks at this information when shopping, and this is influenced by an interest in healthy eating. This raises the question of how consumers can be encouraged to look for nutrition information on food labels.

Acknowledgement

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