

EUFIC reviews European evidence on whether nutrition labelling has helped encourage healthy eating

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A recent review has highlighted the latest research on whether nutrition labelling has been effective in encouraging healthy eating. While the last decade has seen the emergence of a great deal of research in this area, it remains unclear whether the provision of nutrition information has been able to prompt consumers to make healthier food choices in real life.

The present review looked at evidence from three main fields of analysis – self-reported food choice, sales data and national intake surveys. In addition to this, recent research on health logos and symbols was reviewed. Requirements for inclusion of the studies reviewed were a publication date after 2000 and a focus on behavioural measurements.

Concerning the methodology of self-reported food choice, it was found that results may differ widely across countries and studies, often owing to differences in research methodology. For example, a study with Dutch and Turkish participants compared the impact of a “health tick” logo (only present on healthier options), a multiple traffic lights label or a plain nutrition table on consumers’ ability to make healthier food choices from a given set of products. The health tick best guided people towards healthier options compared to the other two labels. Under time pressure, however, the multiple traffic lights label became equally helpful. In contrast, a study with German participants found that a health tick, multiple traffic lights, monochrome or colour-coded guideline daily amounts all helped people to a similar extent in identifying the healthier alternative, but did not lead them to actually choose healthier products. Giving people a specific task (e.g. ‘reduce your salt intake) may help to remedy the latter.

The second type of studies reviewed looked at the analysis of sales data to find out how changes in the availability/presentation of nutrition information can affect consumers’ food purchases. Here, time periods before and after the introduction of a new or different food labelling format are selected and product purchases are compared “before and after”. While immediate effects on product sales are repeatedly found throughout different studies, evidence for long-term effects is difficult to provide. The authors argue that the varying nature of these sales data holds room for improvement and further research is much needed. In particular, the realm of online shopping is a relatively new aspect of consumers’ food shopping experience which has yet to be explored in more detail.

The third methodology reviewed was national intake surveys: (panel) data collecting population-wide information on dietary behaviour and food intake. For example, analysis of survey data from the US found that the introduction of food labels in 1990 had a positive effect on nutrient intake: people were eating more fibre and less fat, cholesterol and sodium. Since then, however, research has shown that the people who look for nutrition information on fat, saturated fat and cholesterol tend not to be the ones who actually most exceed intake recommendations for these nutrients. Overall, the authors conclude that the analysis of national intake surveys has not revealed any major positive effects of nutrition labels on

healthier eating. However, the complexity of such data and the difficulty to detect clear and meaningful impact factors on food intake (socio-demographic variables, individual characteristics, situational effects, psychological and emotional influences etc.) are said to require the use and improvement of more sophisticated econometric analyses.

Additionally, the impact of health logos and symbols on food choice and healthy eating was reviewed. Logos are inherently different to nutrition labels in that they can only be found on certain products within each product category that meet established nutritional criteria. While American and Canadian logos and symbols have been suggested to stimulate healthier food choices, European studies on such logos have not seen such promising results. Among other things, it appears that this logo only has an effect on consumers that already are interested in health.

As one of the main conclusions, the authors point out that consumers are influenced by a multitude of factors other than nutritional value when choosing foods – for instance: habit, price, and time constraints. Furthermore, there is a lack of standard scales or questionnaires for assessing different aspects of label understanding, liking and use. These limitations need to be taken into account when designing future research in this area. As an avenue for further research, it is suggested to increase the number of studies using multiple methodologies, e.g. observations in-store that are linked to scanner data and can be followed up by shopper interviews. A stronger collaboration with the retail sector in using the facilities, the sector's expertise and the access to the daily generated data is suggested as an important way forward.

For more information, see

[Hieke S & Wills JM \(2012\). Nutrition labelling – is it effective in encouraging healthy eating? CAB Reviews 7\(31\):1-7.](#)