How do consumers respond to portion information on food and drink labels?

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Portion information is often included on food and drink labels but little is known about how consumers interpret and use this information. To find out, EUFIC collaborated with researcher Dr Monique Raats, co-director of the Food, Consumer Behaviour and Health Research Centre at the University of Surrey, England, to carry out an online survey that reached a total of 13,117 consumers in 6 EU countries (Germany, UK, Spain, France, Poland and Sweden). EUFIC has produced a webinar of these initial results has published EUFIC Forum No. 5 "Consumer response to portion information on food and drink packaging. A pan-European study".

In a climate of overweight and obesity, the amount consumers eat or drink is just as important as what is eaten. This study is the most comprehensive study on consumers and portion information in Europe. It provides evidence that when portion information is present on pack in addition to per 100 g/100 ml information, consumers can use it to help them to use nutrition information correctly. Whilst there is an opportunity to educate consumers on what constitutes a portion and how they are set, the challenge remains to encourage consumers to look for and use the information.

Portion information is considered relevant by half of the respondents, and mainly perceived as the amount one should be eating

A majority of consumers described a portion to mean the amount consumed by one person in one sitting. Across all countries there was significant evidence that respondents are more likely to agree that a portion is the amount a person should be eating or drinking in one sitting, rather than what they are likely to consume.

Although only one third of respondents looked for portion information on food and drink packages, nearly half said it was relevant to them. This differed by country, from Spain 70%, to 36% in Germany. But price and use by date are still the most looked for on labels, with almost 90% of consumers claiming to often or always look for this information.

Among the respondents who agreed portion information is relevant to them, most explained it allows them to determine how many portions are in a product, or how much they should buy, or eat, or it allows them to monitor food or nutritional intake. The main reasons given why portion information may not be relevant to everybody relate to people being different, be it in the amount they eat or their appetite, or the degree to which they are weight conscious.

Consumers agree with stated portion size for majority of products
For 15 of the 19 food types, at least half the respondents in all six countries thought the stated portion size was ‘exactly right’. Where they differed, they were likely to think it was too small, rather than too big. Respondents were slightly more likely to agree than disagree that they would like portion information to be more widely available on food and drink packs.

Consumers’ preferred presentation format for portion information depended on the type of food. ‘Per pack’ was the preferred format for most of the 19 food types shown. ‘Per 100 g’ or ‘per 100 ml’ was the preferred format for cheese, soft drinks, soup, and condiments. When a food can be split into single units (biscuits, sliced bread, chocolate bar, sliced meat, takeaway burger, sandwich, sweets) nutrition information by unit was the most or second most preferred format.

Portion information helps consumers to use nutrition information

Most consumers (79%) were able to accurately read and relay nutrient information from labels. Calculating nutrient content per portion from per 100 g information became more difficult for them. As the calculation became more complex, few consumers gave the correct answer, and it took longer to calculate it. When portion information was present along with per 100 g/ml information, there were more correct answers and the response time was quicker (e.g. 21 seconds versus 47 seconds).

Consumers are not clear how portions are set

Respondents were unsure of who or what factors determine portion size. The most popular answer was that the food producer decides. Nutritionist/dietitian was a popular answer in France, Poland and Spain. Many indicated that they don’t know who makes the decision. The amount of calories was most likely to be thought to determine a portion size.

For larger packs, the perceived number of portions was in-line with on-pack number of portions

Though perception of portion size increases as pack size increases, for larger packs, the perceived number of portions was in-line with on-pack number of portions information. For example, the average perceived portion size of the soft drink increased slightly with the size of the bottle (500 ml, 1 l and 1.5 l), but stayed below the 250 ml recommended portion size. When consumers were shown different sizes and pack formats of confectionery bars, a single bar was considered as one portion, and a pack containing two bars was considered as two portions by most consumers in the study.