Do our nutrition labels work?

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Labels on food are supposed to help us make informed choices about what we eat. Knowledge about the nutrient composition of our foods is an essential element for choosing a healthy diet. New research by EUFIC suggests, however, that labels are not giving the consumer what they want and are consequently often ignored. Do the current nutrition labelling requirements need to change? Are consumers being listened to? And what do people want from their nutrition labels?

An appetite for nutrition?

Focus groups recently conducted for EUFIC in France, Germany, Italy and the UK have turned up some good news: it seems that consumers both understand the benefits of nutrition and are positive towards ‘healthy and balanced eating’. The bad news, however, is that whilst people know about certain nutrition basics, the terminology used on the label is not really understood. Consumers certainly don’t use the long list of figures normally featured on labels as a tool for building a healthy diet.

It is not a question of trust – people believe the information on the labels to be accurate – but it is more a question of communication. The role of labels is not clear, nutritional information is often confused with the ingredients list, and in many cases people do not understand how to integrate the provided information into their daily dietary choices.

De-Mystifying the label

Our research showed that current nutrition labels are neither inviting nor motivating to use. So what will it take to change this? Broadly, the answer comes in three parts.

Presentation

Not surprisingly, people want labels to be readable, clear, attractive and well structured. They want the information to stand out. Although they seem not to appreciate, they do understand the limitations that small packages and multiple languages present. They want directions to further help (websites, for example, where lifestyle guidance can be found) and they would like consistency or uniformity across products.

Understanding

People feel alienated by the terminology used in nutritional labelling. They need terms they can relate to, which will help them determine what is important. Nutrition is a science, but most consumers are not scientists. What is ‘sodium’? Is it the same as ‘salt’? What are poly-unsaturated fatty acids? What are trans fatty acids? Are they both equally bad, or good, for you? How can we tell?
Whilst they recognise that not everything can be on the label, they need access to additional information that helps them understand how to transform nutritional information into action. Again, clarity, structure and consistency are very important.

**Confidence**

Consumers need to have confidence that the information provided by labels is derived from a reliable source. It needs to be transparently clear where this information comes from and by whom it is provided and/or endorsed.

**A new direction?**

It may be, therefore, that much of the current discussion about labelling is not taking into consideration consumers’ needs. More figures, longer lists, denser information will not, our research suggests, have the desired effect of encouraging a healthy diet. Consumers need greater knowledge, before they can understand more facts, and they need the ability to apply this knowledge sensibly.

They need an understandable and manageable reference, endorsed by a suitably trustworthy authority. They need information that is simple and easy to use in the daily dietary food intake.

There are many things in the current labelling terminology that can be improved. However, as long as consumers lack a basic understanding of nutritional terms and requirements, the label information will be lost on them. There is an immediate need therefore for better nutrition education and improved nutrition knowledge. This is the big challenge for government, educators, health professionals and all operators in the food chain.