

Nutrition labels everywhere in Europe

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Nutrition information on food labels is meant to help consumers make healthier choices. But how much nutrition information is actually available on food packs across Europe? An extensive European audit conducted by EUFIC provides the answer.

Research project FLABEL

The European Commission-funded project FLABEL (Food Labelling to Advance Better Education for Life) aims to study to what extent nutrition labelling on food packages affects dietary choices and consumer habits in Europe.¹ Since little is known about the penetration of nutrition information on food labels in the European Union (EU), the first phase consisted of evaluating to what extent consumers are exposed to nutrition labels in all 27 EU Member States and Turkey. Previous evidence showed remarkable differences between countries in both the type and extent of information, but the study was carried out in a small number of countries and not all products within a product category were audited.²

In each of the 28 countries, the FLABEL audit was conducted in three types of retail store to cover a wide variety of manufacturers: 1) a retailer among the top 5 in terms of market share, 2) a consumer cooperative or national retailer, and 3) a discounter.³ The following five food and beverage product categories were considered: 1) sweet biscuits, 2) breakfast cereals, 3) chilled pre-packed ready meals, 4) carbonated soft drinks, and 5) yoghurts. A data collection grid was designed to record where nutrition information occurred on the pack (front-of-pack (FOP) versus back-of-pack (BOP)), in which format it was given (e.g. nutrition table), which items (nutrients, calories) were stated and whether health logos, or nutrition or health claims were present. After six months of research and with more than 37,000 products audited in a total of 84 retail stores, here are the results.

Wide penetration of nutrition information

Countries in comparison

Nutrition information was widely available in the five food product categories, giving key information to consumers on the nutritional value of these foods. On average 85% of the products audited contained nutrition information on the back of pack, ranging from 70% for Slovenia to more than 95% for Ireland, UK and The Netherlands. FOP nutrition information was found on average on 48% of products, reaching from 24% in Turkey to as high as 82% in the UK.³

The most widespread BOP format was the tabular or linear listing of calorific value and nutrient composition at 84%, highlighting either the "Big 4" (calories, protein, carbohydrates, fat; 34%) or the "Big 8" ("Big 4" plus sugar, saturated fat, fibre and sodium; 49%). Nutrition claims and Guideline Daily Amounts (GDA) were the most prevalent forms of FOP nutrition information, both averaging 25%, with nutrition

claims ranging from 12% in Estonia to 37% in Ireland and Portugal, and GDA ranging from 2% in Turkey to 63% in the UK.³ Sweden and The Netherlands were the only countries where the penetration of health logos (here: Swedish Keyhole, Choices logo, Healthy choice clover) exceeded 10% (FOP) penetration for all products combined.

Nutrition labelling by product category

Among the five categories of products audited, nutrition labels were most abundant on breakfast cereals: 94% of these products had BOP nutrition labelling and 70% showed FOP nutrition information. Again, the BOP tabular or linear listing of nutrition content was most common, stating either the Big 8 (78%) or the Big 4 (15%). GDA, which had a wider penetration on carbonated soft drinks, reached a maximum of 71% of breakfast cereal products in the UK. Nutrition claims peaked on breakfast cereals at 82% (BOP) in France and at 76% (FOP) in Portugal. Health logo penetration was highest at 47% of breakfast cereals in Sweden and at 27% of yoghurts in The Netherlands, both FOP.

Across all five categories, 5% (Denmark) to 16% (France) of products were attractive to children as judged by characteristics such as the display of cartoon characters on the pack, or the use of funny colours or playful shapes. Virtually all of those products contained nutrition information, mainly BOP.

Basis to build on

Nutrition labelling, whilst voluntary in Europe except when a nutrition or health claim is made, was found on a large majority of products audited and its presence seems higher than reported previously.² The next FLABEL study phases will deal with attention, reading, liking, understanding and use by consumers of different nutrition labelling formats.

References

1. [FLABEL website.](#)
2. European Advisory Services. The introduction of mandatory nutrition labelling in the European Union: An impact assessment. (Belgium DG SANCO, 2004):32.