

The Importance of Food Labelling

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Ensuring food safety is a shared responsibility between governments, producers, industry and consumers. Food labelling is one way in which consumers can get knowledge about the food they consider buying. Correctly following the information provided on food labels (such as expiry dates, handling instructions and allergy warnings) can help consumers prevent unnecessary food-borne illness and allergic reactions.

Expiry dates

In the European Union (EU), an intricate set of legislation and standards has been developed and implemented to ensure safety throughout the entire food chain. Perishable foods, judged from a microbiological point of view (such as cooked meat products, prepared foods and salads), display a 'use by' date on the package and should not be eaten after this date, as this could present a health risk. In addition, many foods display a 'best before' date, which gives an indication of the "minimum durability", or the period during which the food retains its specific properties when properly stored. In other words, a product whose "best before" date has expired may still be safe to eat, but the manufacturer no longer guarantees the sensory properties of the product (e.g. taste, smell, appearance etc).

In a recent nationally representative survey from the UK, only half (49%) of the over 3000 respondents correctly identified the 'use by' date as the best measure of safety and 47% said they would never eat cooked meat beyond its 'use by' date.¹ Most respondents were found to be using expiry dates as a point of reference and relying on their own judgement to decide if the food was safe to eat by smelling it (74%) or by just looking at the food (65%). In a nationally representative study from Ireland (796 respondents), only 39% of people regularly referred to the food label of a product, and of these, only half referred to the best before/use by dates on a food label.² Other studies in the EU have reported similar findings.³⁻⁵ It should be borne in mind though that food can be contaminated with food poisoning bacteria such as *Listeria* and *Salmonella* without an odour or a change in product appearance.

Storage, preparation and cooking information

Storage instructions are required on certain food products in combination with the expiry date to ensure proper handling by consumers. Food poisoning bacteria such as *Salmonella* and *Listeria* can grow to levels that may cause illness if food is not stored correctly. These instructions may also indicate how to store the food once the package is opened (e.g., 'Refrigerate after opening'). Although consumers often use storage conditions and preparation guidelines, it is usually only when they buy a new product and not when it is a product they have previously purchased. In a recent quantitative study, 1012 Irish consumers were asked to rate the importance of mandatory labelling information for pre-packaged foodstuffs.⁶ The majority (over 70%) regarded storage conditions and 'instructions for use (where necessary)' as important information on the label. In another study from Ireland, only 12% of the 796 respondents said they referred to the cooking instructions when looking at food labels and even less, 9%, regularly refer to storage instructions.² These

studies indicate that while consumers say that information on storage, preparation and cooking information of food on labels is important, they may not use this information very often.

Allergy warnings

Other important information on food labels includes allergy warnings which help consumers who have specific food allergies, to avoid those allergens that may be present in specific food products. EU legislation requires labelling of 14 substances that are known allergens in some people.⁷ The requirement is to label them only when they are present. In other words, there is no labelling of absence, unless a product would be targeted at a population that has a specific allergy or food intolerance (e.g. gluten free).

Consumers with food allergies have reported spending a lot more time on grocery shopping to find suitable products but sometimes have noticed a lack of information about the inclusion of potential allergens in the food products they would like to eat.^{8,9} A study to understand the attitudes of British parents of children with nut allergy towards labels informing that the product could contain nuts revealed that 80% of parents would not purchase a product labelled 'not suitable for nut allergy sufferers' or 'may contain nuts'.¹⁰ However, other labels including 'this product does not contain any nuts but is made in a factory that uses nuts', 'cannot guarantee is nut free' and 'may contain traces of nuts' were avoided by only around 50% of parents. These results indicate that food product labelling remains confusing to those with food allergies leading to risk-taking by either ignoring warning labels on foods or assuming that the wording reflects the gradation of risk.

References

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