

Nutrition labelling becomes mandatory in Europe

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The European Commission has published a new Regulation on the provision of food information to consumers ('Food Information Regulation'), applicable to all member states of the European Union (EU). This regulation makes nutrition labelling mandatory for pre-packed food and is to be implemented over the next years. What do the new rules stipulate?

Mandatory nutrition labelling

After 8 years of negotiation, a new food labelling regulation replaces directive 90/496/EEC of 1990 and directive 2000/13/EC.¹⁻³ The new regulation makes nutrition labelling mandatory, and instructs food manufacturers to provide information on the energy value and 6 nutrients; fat, saturates, carbohydrate, sugars, protein and salt – in this order, and expressed per 100g or per 100ml of product.³ This information should be presented in a nutrition table in the same field of vision (most likely to be the back of the pack), and may in addition be expressed on a per portion basis. Further nutrients (i.e. monounsaturates, polyunsaturates, polyols, starch, fibre, vitamins and minerals) can be included voluntarily. It is important to recognise that the regulation only mandates nutrition labelling in the same field of vision, commonly on the 'back of pack'; labelling in the principal field of vision (e.g. 'front-of-pack') remains voluntary.

Specific rules apply if information is repeated on the front of the pack, which can be the content of energy alone or in combination with fat, saturates, sugar and salt. In such cases, the energy value must be presented in absolute amounts per 100g (ml) and additionally may be expressed per portion. The new regulation maintains the requirement to display energy in both kilojoules (kJ) and kilocalories (kcal) per 100 g (ml) (there are 4.2kJ in each kcal). When this information is declared for a portion or unit (e.g. amount per biscuit), the size of a portion/unit must be indicated, in conjunction with the number of portions or units contained in the package.

For the majority of food packaging labels, a minimum font size of 1.2mm is required for all mandatory food information. Smaller packaging (with a largest surface below 80cm²) has a smaller minimum font size requirement (0.9mm). Additionally, voluntary information (e.g. slogans or claims) must not be presented in a manner that impinges on the presentation of mandatory information.

Allergen labelling

A number of foods have been established as responsible for the majority of allergic reactions to foods. If they are present in the food, they must be clearly displayed and highlighted in the list of ingredients. Requirements on the provision of information concerning allergens also cover non-pre-packed foods, including those sold in restaurants and cafés.

Language requirements

Mandatory food information will be required to appear in a language easily understood by consumers. Additionally, the Member States in which a food is marketed may stipulate that the information is given in one or more languages from among the official EU languages.

Distance selling requirements

When food is sold by means of 'distance communication' (e.g. internet or catalogues), the mandatory information present on the label must be made available before the purchase is concluded. This information must also be displayed on any material supporting the distance selling or provided through other appropriate means (e.g. webpage or catalogue).

Entry into force

All pre-packed food products sold within the EU must display nutrition information in accordance with the new rules within three years of their formal adoption where this is already provided, i.e. by December 2014. However, if no nutrition information has been provided, the obligation to meet the new legal requirements will not become mandatory until five years after the formal adoption, i.e. December 2016.

Exemptions

The new regulation exempts certain food categories from the mandatory nutrition labelling requirements. Exemptions include unprocessed foods or items for which nutrition information is not considered a determining factor for consumers' purchasing decisions, or for which the packaging is too small to accommodate the mandatory labelling requirements.

Alcoholic beverages are provisionally exempt from the requirements to provide an ingredients list and nutrition information. However, within three years after the entry into force of the Regulation, the European Commission will examine this issue and, if necessary, propose amendments.

Outlook

The new labelling law aims to empower consumers to make more informed dietary decisions. However, the challenge remains to generate and promote interest in and motivation for healthy eating among consumers. Provision of consistent information across food products will hopefully aid in achieving greater awareness and use of nutrition information.

References

1. [Council Directive 90/496/EEC of 24 September 1990 on nutrition labelling for foodstuffs.](#)

2. [Directive 2000/13/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 March 2000 on the approximation of the laws of the Member States relating to the labelling, presentation and advertising of foodstuffs.](#)
3. [Regulation \(EU\) No 1169/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2011 on the provision of food information to consumers.](#)