Consumer Use and Understanding of Food Labels

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Introduction

- The Importance of Food and Nutrition Labels
- Consumer use and understanding of food labels
- Consumer use and understanding of nutrition labels
- Front of Pack Labelling
- Future research and developments
Food and Nutrition Labels
Why is Consumer Understanding Important?

- Unhealthy Diets are a leading cause of avoidable illness and premature death in Europe (EC 2005)
- Diets high in saturated fat and calories and low in fruit and vegetables accounts for 1/3 of cardiovascular disease and 30-40% of cancers (WHO 2002, EC 2005)
- Nutrition label informs consumers about the nutrition in food & allows them to make purchase decisions based on nutrition

Confusion Between Food Labels and Nutrition Labels

- Consumers frequently confuse label terms:
  - Food labels with nutrition labels
  - Nutrition label with ingredient lists
  - Nutrition claims with nutrition labels

- Check research and research terms
  - What are the researchers studying?
  - What do the consumers think they are answering?

Consumer Understanding of Food Labels
Do Consumers Read Food Labels?

FSAI 2009: A Research Study into Consumers’ Attitudes to Food Labelling

- Never, 12%
- Always, 25%
- Rarely, 15%
- Usually, 19%
- Sometimes, 29%
What do Consumers Look for on Food Labels?: Ireland

37% Looked for Nutrient Information; 35% for Calories; 4% for Fat

FSAI 2009: A Research Study into Consumers’ Attitudes to Food Labelling
What do Consumers look for on Food Labels?: Europe

- Netherlands: Food safety and GMO are of more concern than nutrition
- Sweden: Food safety, pesticides and animal welfare were of greater concern
- In general, best before dates and food origin are of most importance

Mandatory Information: What do Irish Consumers Consider Important?

- Best before date most important piece of information: 95%
- List of ingredients: 78%
- Origin: 74%
- Instructions for use: 74%
- Quantity of Certain Ingredients 72%

FSAI 2009: A Research Study into Consumers’ Attitudes to Food Labelling
Best before/use by date is very important
- Many consumers confuse ‘use by’ and ‘best before’

Quantitative Ingredient Declaration (QUID)
- Few use QUID information
- Some consumers believe that QUID can be used to determine the nutritional or preservative content of foods
Why do Consumers not Read Food Labels?

- Habit or brand loyalty
- Lack of time
- Price driven
- Unsure about accuracy of information
- Technical terms
- Overwhelmed or confused by too much information

Which Consumers and Which Foods?

- Women and those who do the household shopping most likely to read food labels

- Consumers are least likely to read labels on ‘everyday products’ such as milk, pasta, juices and pre-packaged fruit and vegetables

- Also tend not to read labels on ‘junk’ foods as they already know the food is unhealthy

FSAI (2009); Food Standards Agency (2007); Grunert & Wills (2007).
Consumer Use and Understanding of Nutrition Labels
Why Do Consumers Read Nutrition Labels?

- Irish study (2006) found 55% of consumers reported reading nutrition labels.

- 536 Irish Consumers 2006:
  - 45% “As part of a healthy lifestyle”
  - 21% “To see what nutrients are in the food”
  - 14% “I am on a weight loss diet”
  - 7.5% “Concerned about my children's diet”
  - 1.2% “I am on a special diet”

- Similar results in other studies (FSA 2007).

- Most reported reason: “To avoid certain nutrients”

What do Consumers Look for on Nutrition Labels?

- Most commonly looked for are
  - Calories
  - Fat

- Then:
  - Sugar, salt, carbohydrates, vitamins and calcium

Grunert et al. (2010) Nutrition Knowledge, and Use and Understanding of Nutrition Information on food labels among consumers in the UK
Food Standards Agency (2007). Review and Analysis of current Literature on Consumers Understanding of Nutrition and Health Claims Made on Food
Main Nutrients Looked for on Nutrition Labels – Irish Consumers 2006

- Calories: 41.7%
- Energy: 11.5%
- Protein: 12%
- Carbohydrate: 8.4%
- Sugar
- Fat
- Saturated fat
- Salt
- Vitamins
- Other
Who Reads Nutrition Labels?

- Women, younger people, those with higher levels of education and higher SE groups are most likely to read labels.

- Men, older consumers, those with low levels of education and lower SE groups, least likely to read labels.

- Little impact from special diets in Ireland.

- Variation is also seen between countries.

Campus et al. (2011). Nutrition Labels on pre-packaged Food: A systematic Review.
Why Do Irish Consumers Not Read Nutrition Labels?

- Lack of Interest
- Lack of Time
- Already know about the nutrition in food
- Print is too small

Bar chart showing percentages:
- No interest: 43.1%
- No time: 11%
- Print is too small: 11%
- I know about nutrition in food: 10%
- I don’t buy processed food: 5%
- Other: 0%
What Would Encourage Irish Consumers to Read the Nutrition Label?

- 44% Nothing
- 15% Make labels easier to read
- 18.9% Put on a special diet
- 9% Topic highlighted in the media
In general, consumers report understanding most of the information on nutrition labels but:

- Report finding the information confusing
- Don’t understand ‘technical terms’
- Confuse relationships between:
  - salt & sodium
  - energy & calories
  - sugar & carbohydrate
  - saturated fat & polyunsaturated fat

Reported understanding is increased in female and younger consumers and those with higher education and incomes

Campus et al. (2011); Food Standards Agency (2007).
Perceived Understanding of the Nutrition Label: Irish Consumers

How much of the information on the nutrition label do you understand?
Is There a Difference Between Salt and Sodium?  
Irish Consumers 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Don't know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>32.3%</td>
<td>33.6%</td>
<td>34.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What is the Difference Between Salt and Sodium?

Irish Consumers 2006

- Correct: 27.2%
- Incorrect: 21.4%
- Don’t know: 51.4%
What is the Difference Between Salt and Sodium?
Irish Consumers 2006

Consumer Comments:

“Salt is bad, sodium is good”

“Sodium is the anti-caking agent in salt”

Overall, 8.8% of Consumers knew the difference between salt and sodium
Is There a Difference Between Energy & Calories?  
Irish Consumers 2006

- Yes: 60.6%
- No: 21.1%
- Don't know: 18.3%
What is the Difference Between Energy & Calories?
Irish Consumers 2006

- Correct: 10.5%
- Incorrect: 38.2%
- Don’t know: 51.1%
What is the Difference Between Energy & Calories?
536 Irish Consumers 2006

Consumer Comments:

“Energy is kilojoules and calories are calories”

“Energy is good, Calories are bad”

“Energy gives you vitality and calories make you fat”

6.5% knew the difference between energy and calories
Improving Consumer Understanding of Nutrition labelling

- In recent years, more focus on ‘Front-of-Pack’ Labelling
  - Guideline Daily Amounts (GDAs)
  - Traffic Lights
  - GDA and Traffic Light combinations
- Consumers find visual or descriptive information better than numerical, so FOP labelling may be better understood

Food Standards Agency (2007). Review and Analysis of current Literature on Consumer Understanding of Nutrition and Health Claims Made on Food
Traffic Light Labelling

- Traffic lights are very simple and give guidance on high, medium and low levels of key nutrients.
- Useful and liked but don’t relate nutrients to consumers daily needs.
- Consumers may overinterpret severity of ‘Amber’ and ‘Red’.
Guideline Daily Amounts (GDAs)

- Shows the amounts of key nutritional requirements per portion
- Shows % contribution of a portion of that food to the persons GDA
- Liked as it relates a food to a total diet but requires some explanation
- Consumers can be confused about portion vs pack and can assume the GDA applies to the entire pack
Faster decision making with traffic lights
More detailed decisions made with GDAs
Most effective appears to be a combination of Traffic lights and GDAs
Regardless of format, up to 88% of consumers can correctly identify the healthiness of a pre-packed food using FOP labelling
select the “healthier” product when presented with a choice
Overall, any front of pack information seems to be more useful to consumers than current nutrition label

Grunert et al. (2010).
More research is needed on consumer use and understanding of nutrition labels in countries other than the UK

Use and understanding needs to be assessed in real-life situations

Research is needed on what motivates consumers to use nutrition labels

Identify interventions to increase label use and understanding

Explore associations between label reading and diet quality

To Conclude…

- Up to 65% of Consumers report using nutrition labels; up to 27% in practice
- Few fully understand the nutrition or food label and consumers are frequently confused by label terms
- Front-of-pack labelling increases consumer understanding and ability to make choices
- But: what is the influence of label use on actual diet?
"Finally, a food label I can understand! Each serving contains 10 grams of fat and 5 grams of thin."

Reprinted from The Funny Times / PO Box 18530 / Cleveland Heights, OH 44118
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European Food Information Council (2005). *Nutrition Information and Food Labelling: Results of EUFIC Consumer Research Conducted in May – June 2004*. Available at: [www.eufic.org](http://www.eufic.org)


Storcksdieck et al. (2010). Penetration of Nutrition Information on Food Labels across the EU-27 and Turkey
Future of Nutrition Labelling
EU Mandatory Labelling from 2016

- Regulation (EU) No. 1169/2011 on the Provision of Information to Consumers

- Mandatory Declaration of “the Big Seven”:
  - Energy
  - Fat and saturated fat
  - Carbohydrate and sugar
  - Protein
  - Salt

- Expressed per 100g/mls and per portion where appropriate

- By Dec 2014 for new foods, Dec 2016 for existing foods

EU Mandatory Labelling from 2016: Benefits to Consumers

- Easier to Read:
  - Minimum font size 1.2mm (0.9mm for packs with largest surface area less than 80cm²)
- Salt listed instead of sodium
- But:
  - No front of pack labelling
  - Excludes trans fats and alcohol
“Food Labelling to Advance Better Education for Life”
EU funded project
Aims to understand how nutrition information on food labels affects consumers’ dietary choices
All 27 EU member states and Turkey
1st Phase examined prevalence of nutrition labelling
Basis for studies on attention, reading, liking, understanding and use

Storcksdieck et al. (2010). Penetration of Nutrition Information on Food Labels across the EU-27 and Turkey