

# 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

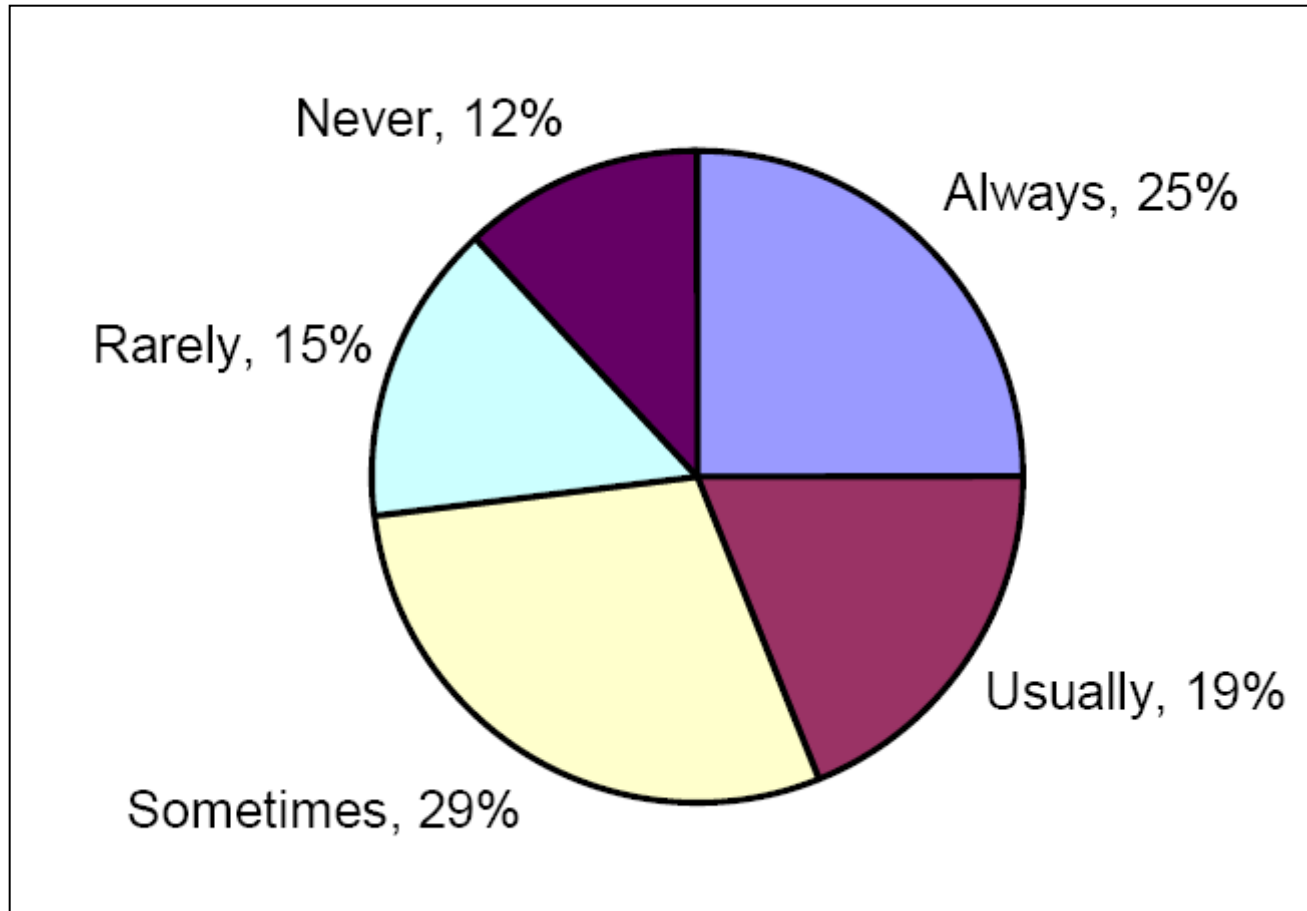
- Consumers frequently confuse label terms:
  - Food labels with nutrition labels
  - Nutrition label with ingredient lists
  - Nutrition claims with nutrition labels
  
- Check research and research terms
  - What are the researchers studying?
  - What do the consumers think they are answering?

Grunert & Wills (2007). *A Review of European Research on Consumer Response to Nutrition Information on Food Labels.*



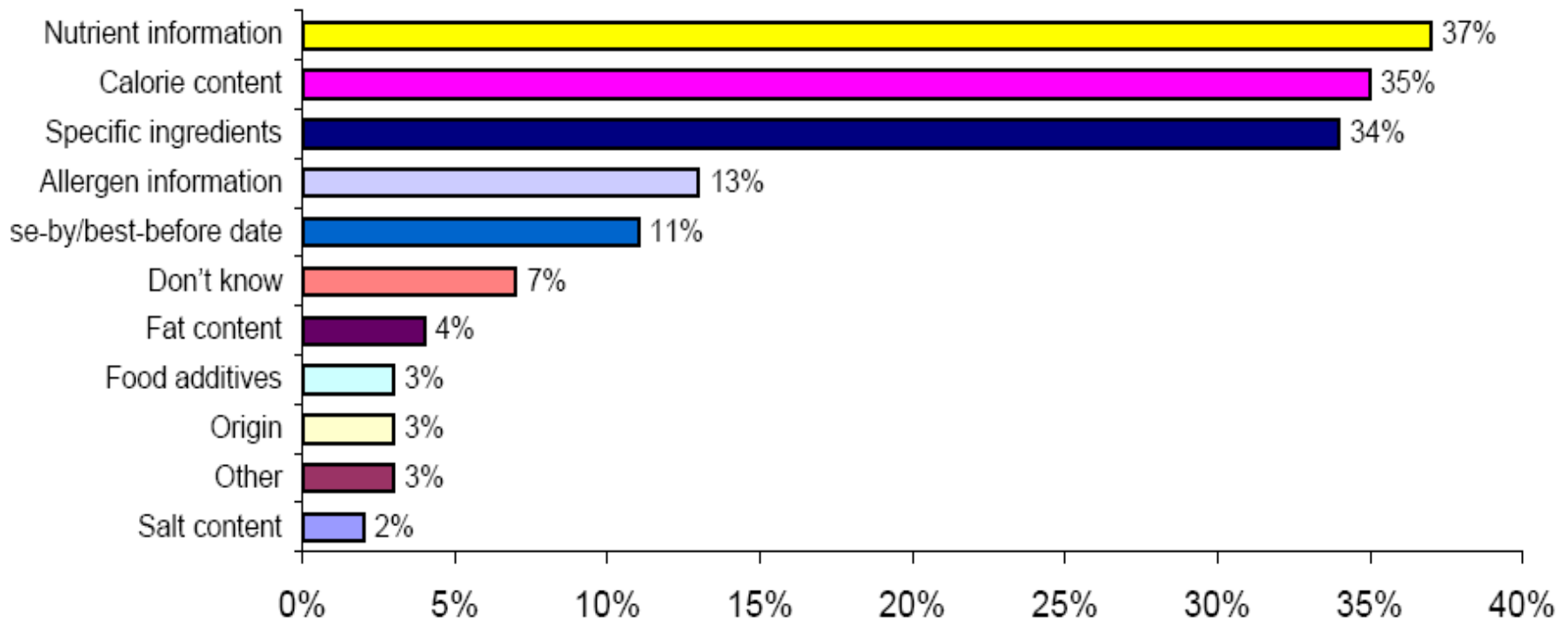
# Consumer Understanding of Food Labels

# Do Consumers Read Food Labels?



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

# What do Consumers Look for on Food Labels?: Ireland



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



# 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

Grunert & Wills (2007). *A Review of European Research on Consumer Response to Nutrition Information on Food Labels.*

# 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%

# Understanding the Food label

- 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



# 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?

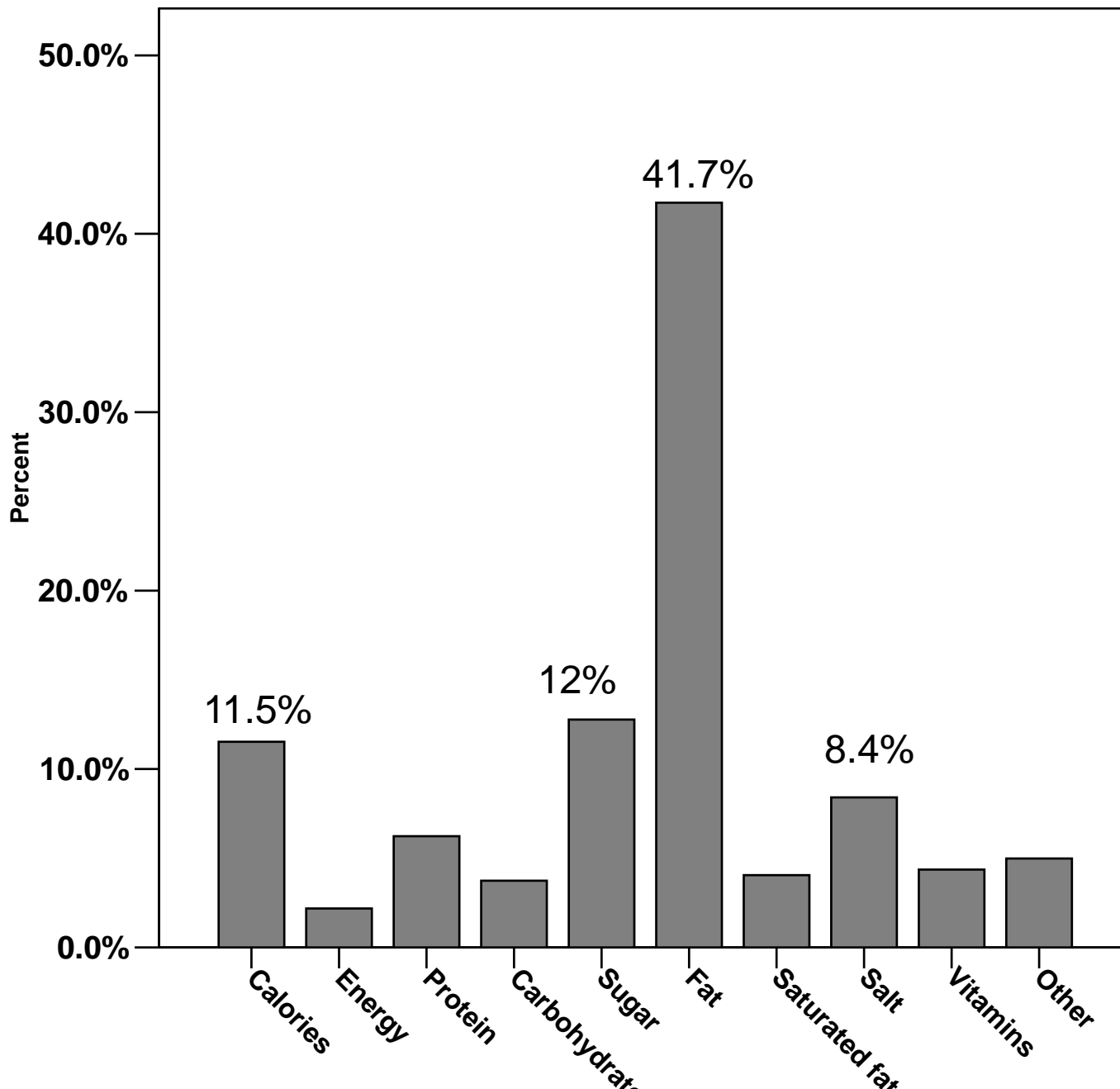
- Most commonly looked for are
  - Calories
  - Fat
- Then:
  - Sugar, salt, carbohydrates, vitamins and calcium

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 Consumer Understanding of Nutrition and Health Claims Made on Food



# Main Nutrients Looked for on Nutrition Labels – Irish Consumers 2006

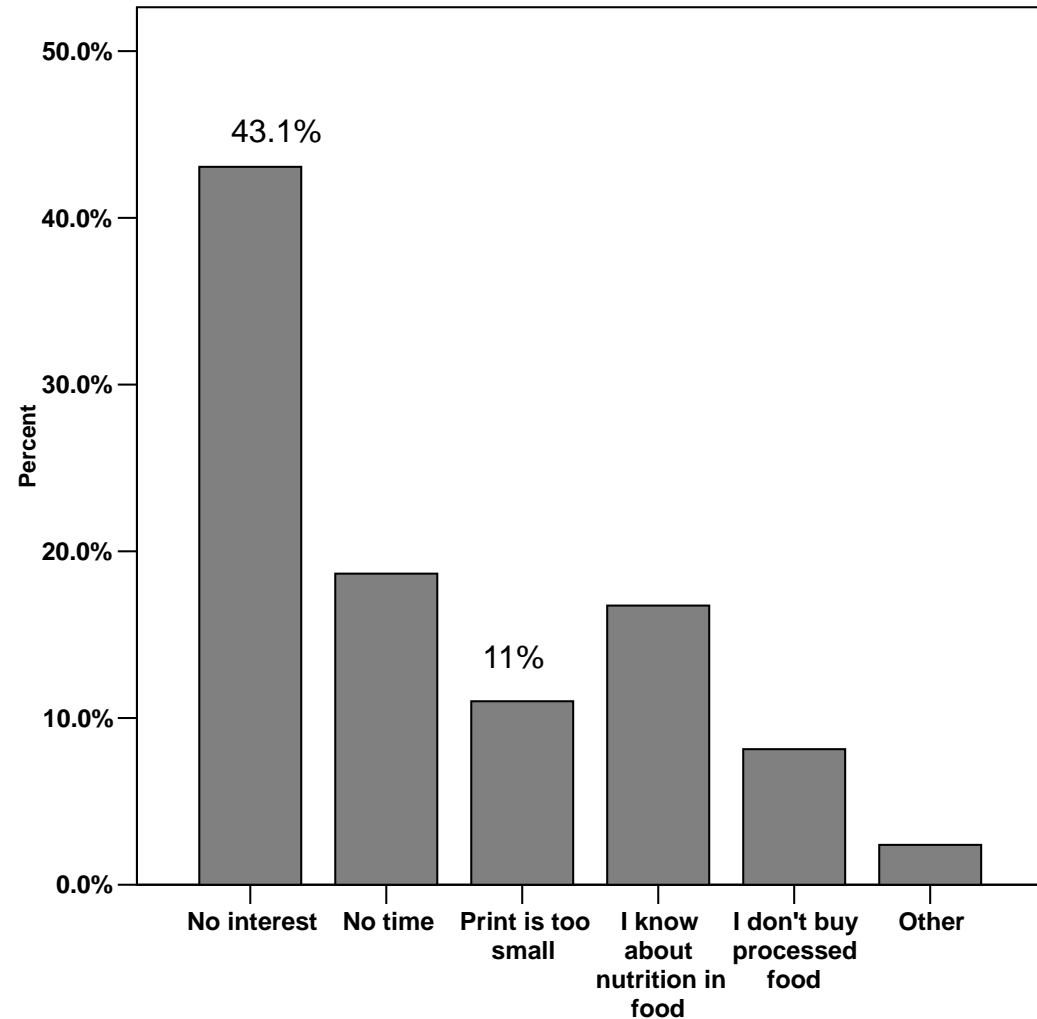


# Who Reads Nutrition Labels?

- 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

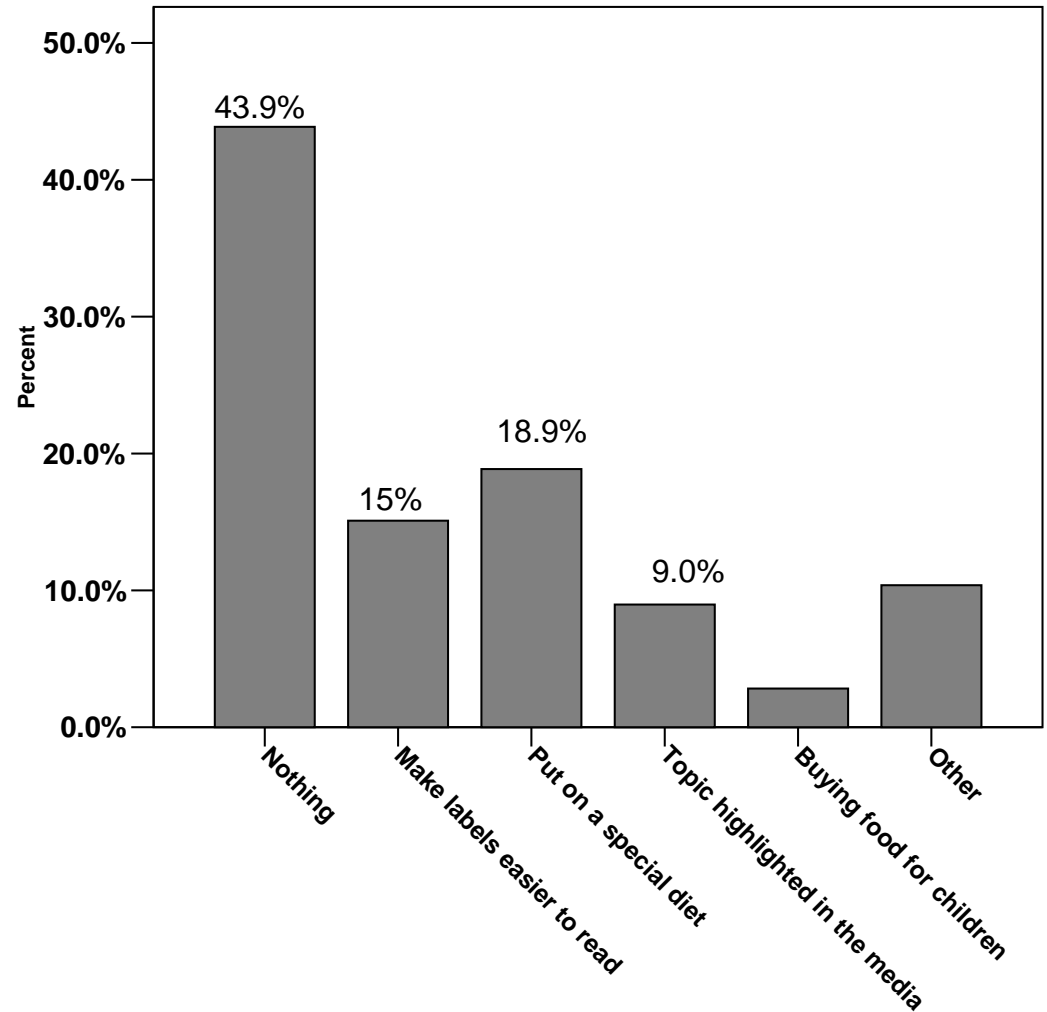
# Why Do Irish Consumers Not Read Nutrition Labels?

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



# 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

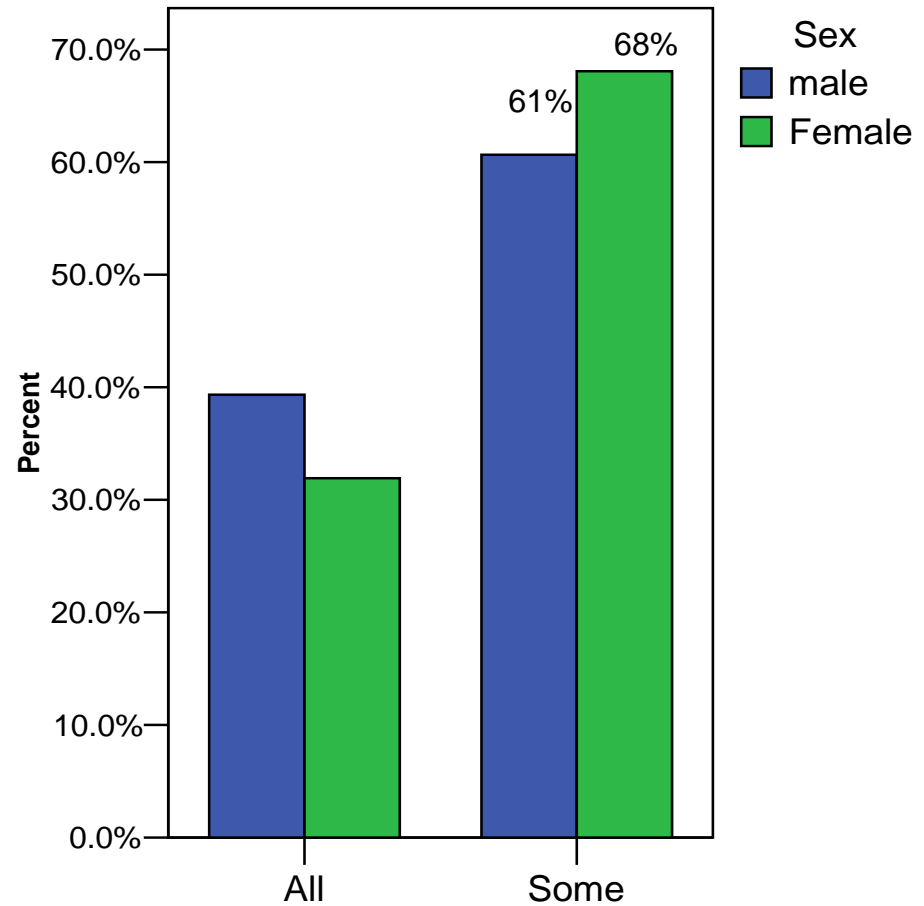


# Do Consumers Understand Nutrition Labels?

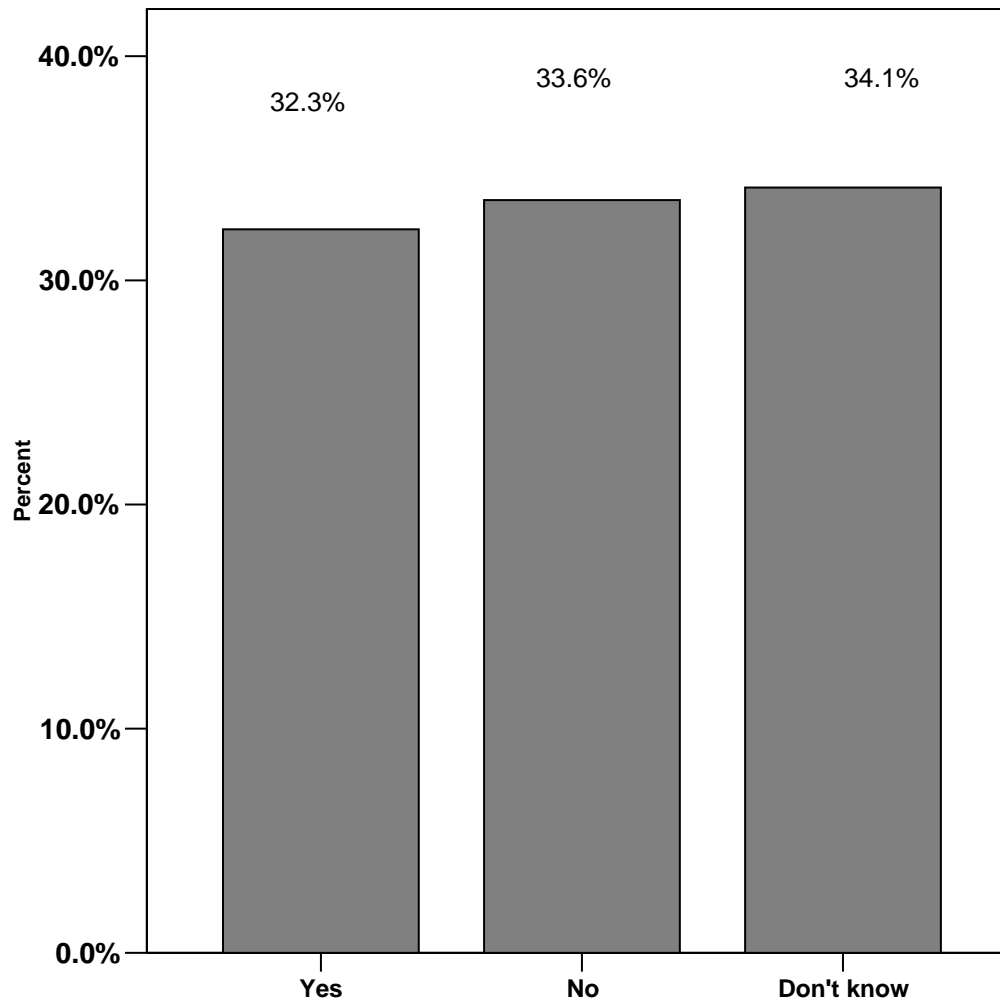
- In general, consumers report understanding most of the information on nutrition labels but:
  - Report finding the information confusing
  - Don't understand 'technical terms'
  - Confuse relationships between:
    - salt & sodium
    - energy & calories
    - sugar & carbohydrate
    - saturated fat & polyunsaturated fat
- Reported understanding is increased in female and younger consumers and those with higher education and incomes

# Perceived Understanding of the Nutrition Label: Irish Consumers

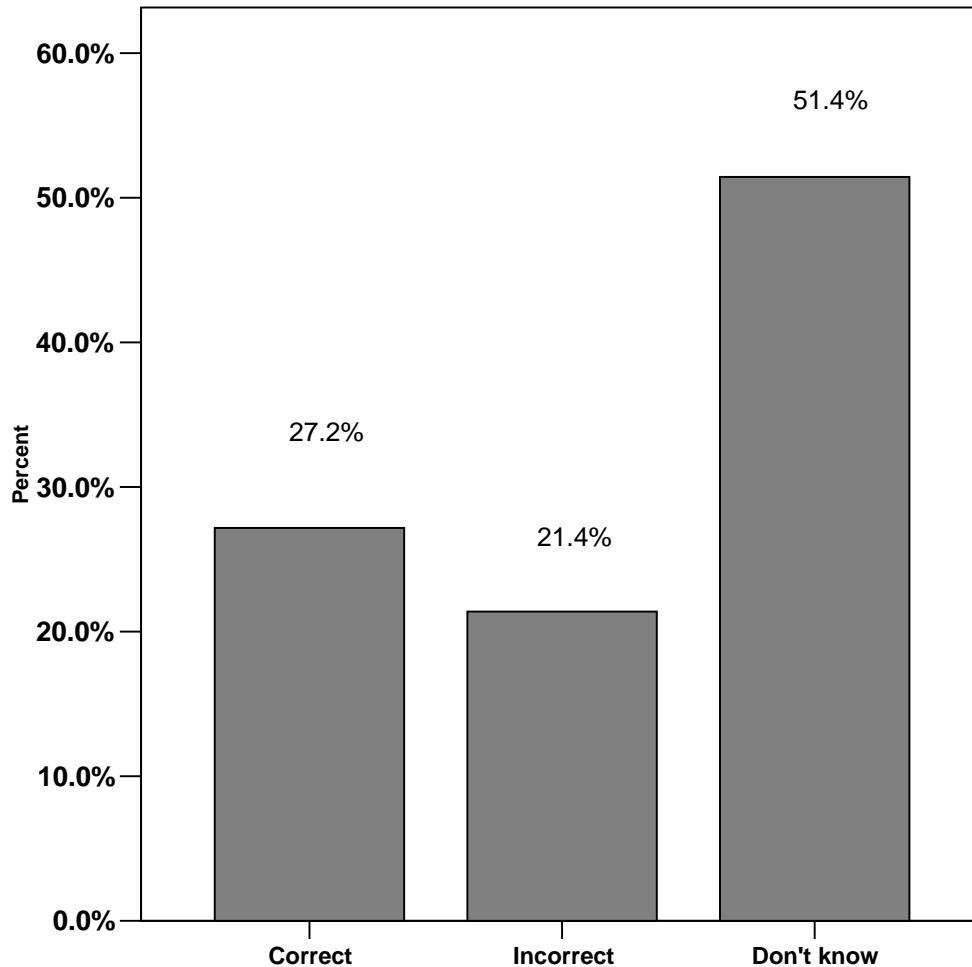
How much of the information on the nutrition label do you understand?



# Is There a Difference Between Salt and Sodium? Irish Consumers 2006



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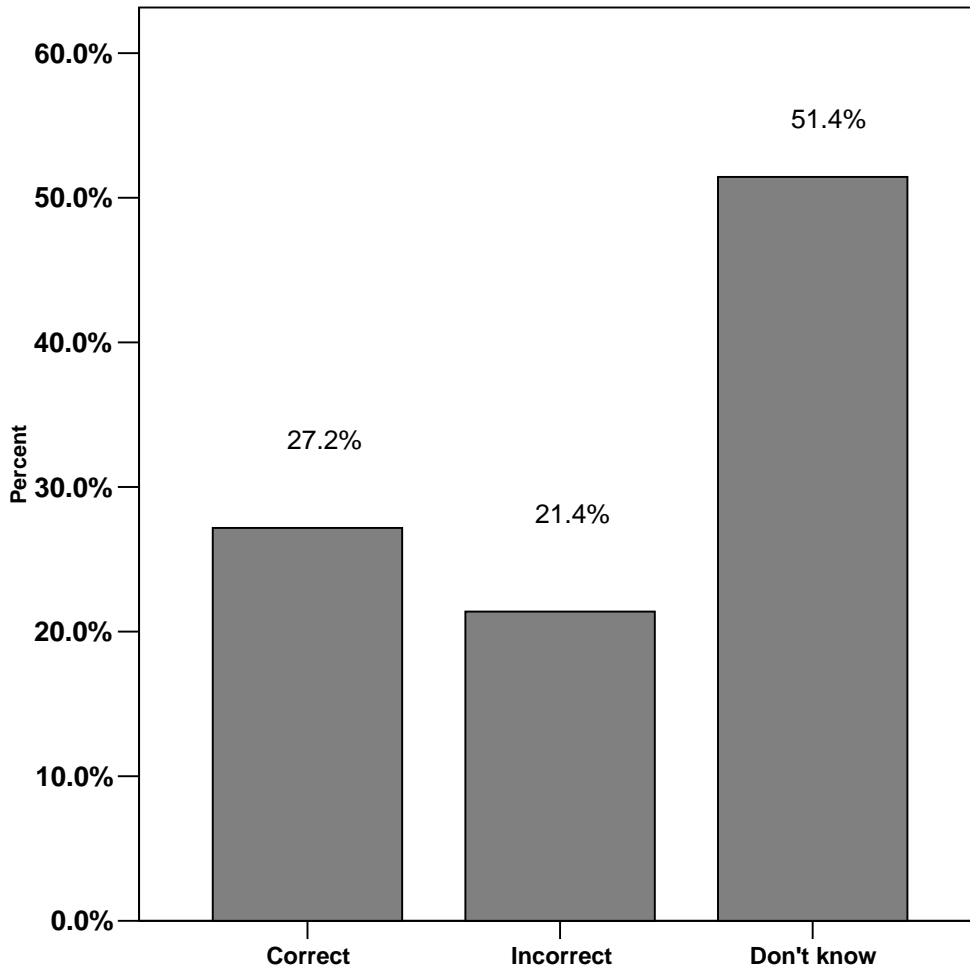
# What is the Difference Between Salt and Sodium? Irish Consumers 2006

## Consumer Comments:

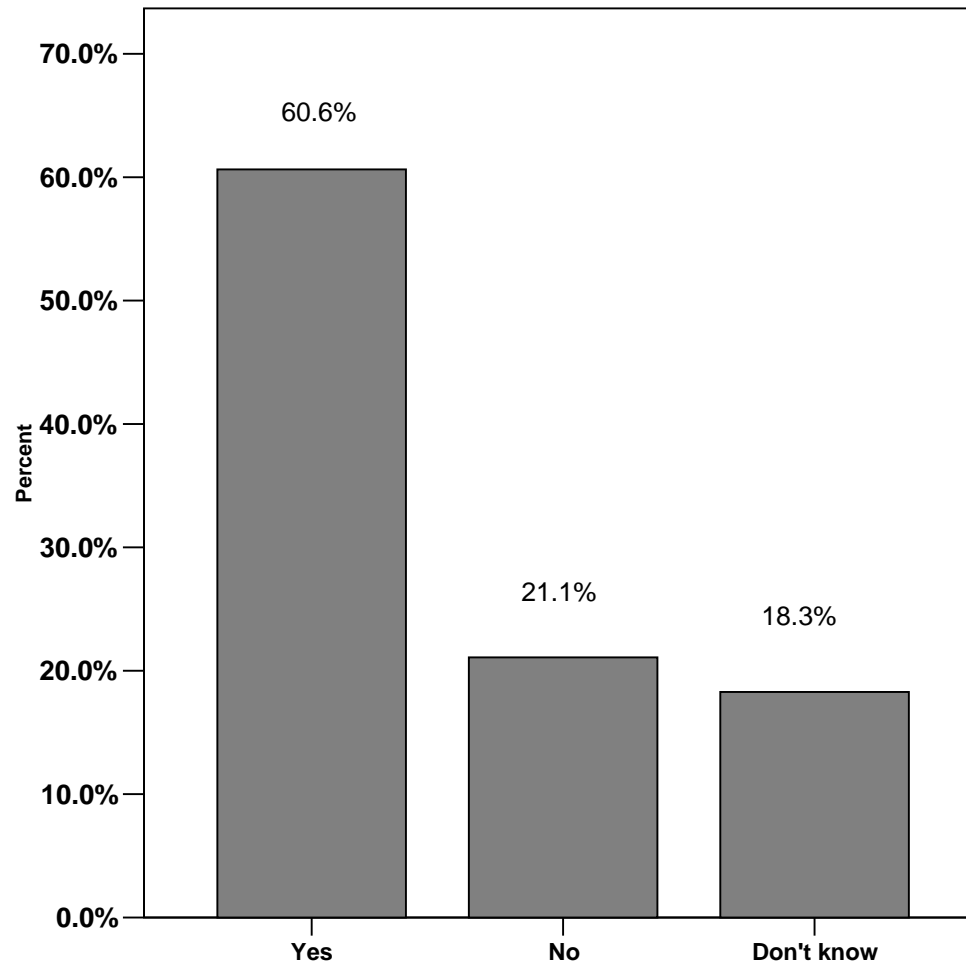
“Salt is bad, sodium is good”

“Sodium is the anti-caking agent in salt”

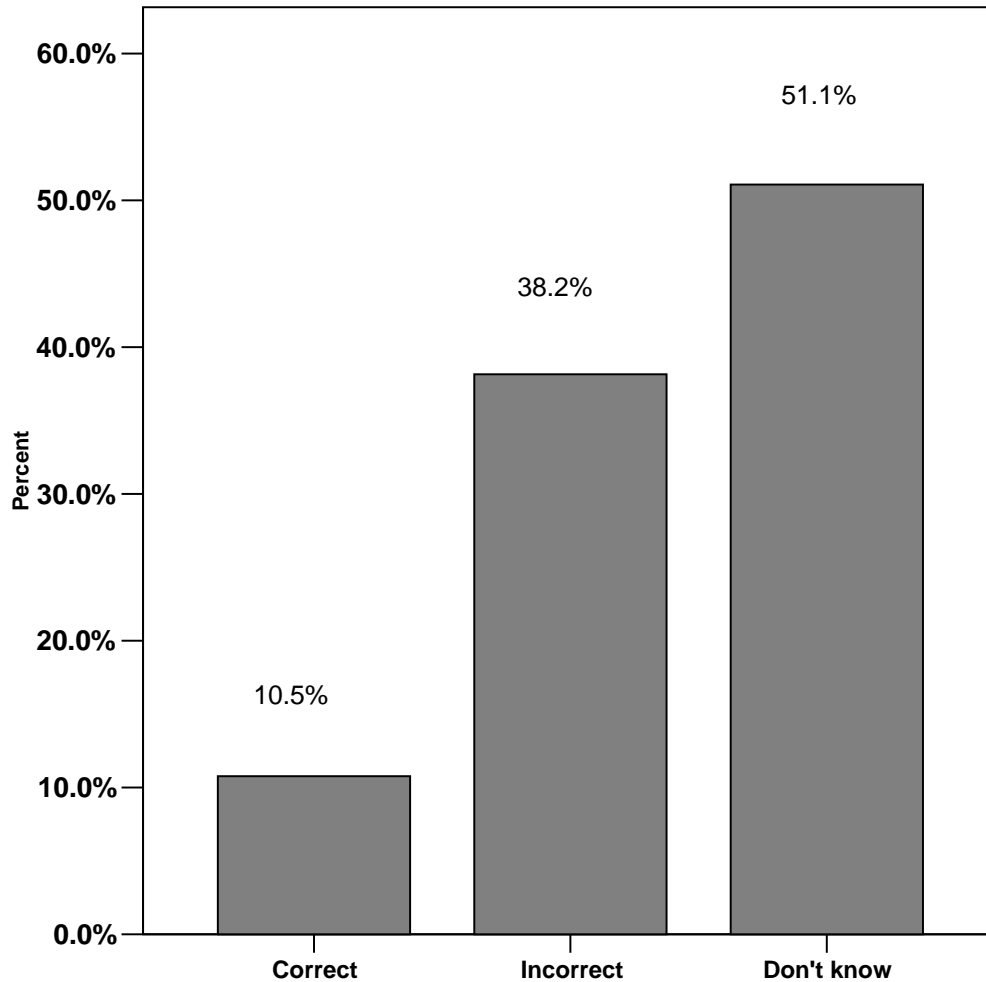
Overall, 8.8% of Consumers knew the difference between salt and sodium



# Is There a Difference Between Energy & Calories? Irish Consumers 2006

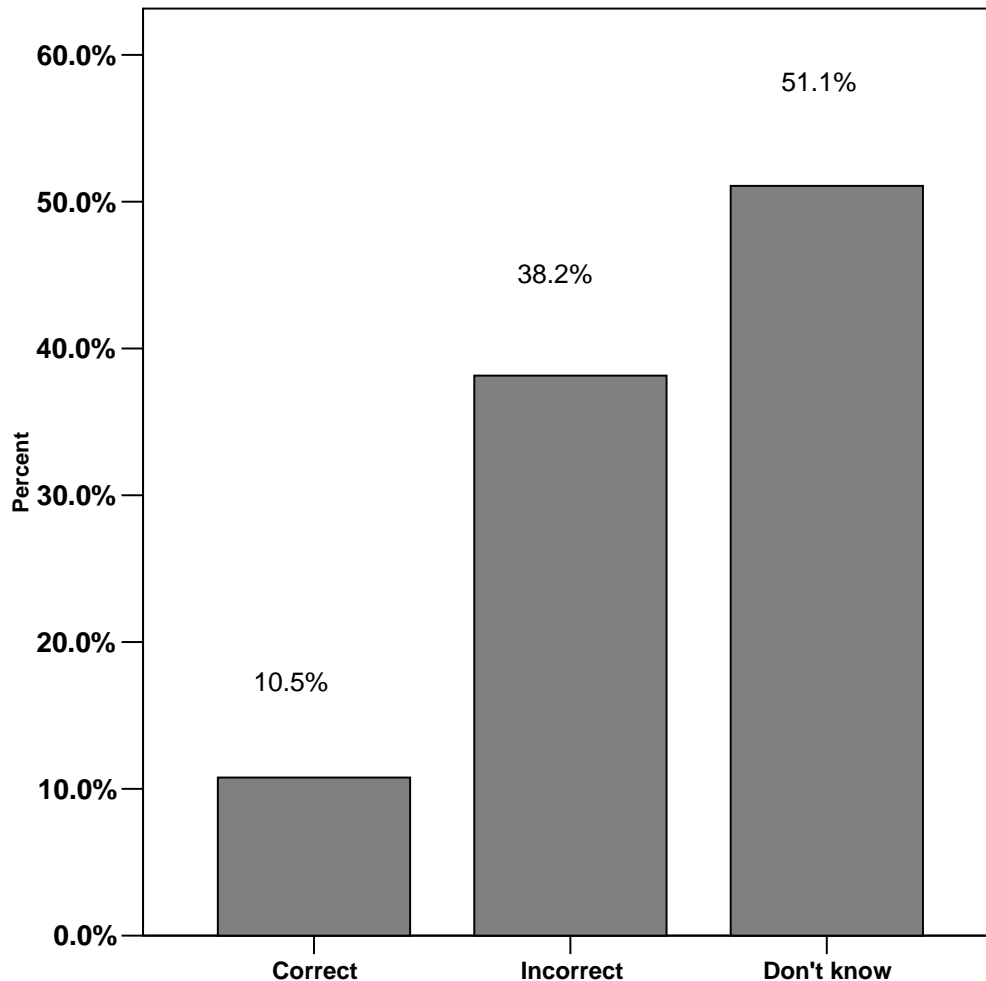


# What is the Difference Between Energy & Calories? Irish Consumers 2006



# 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

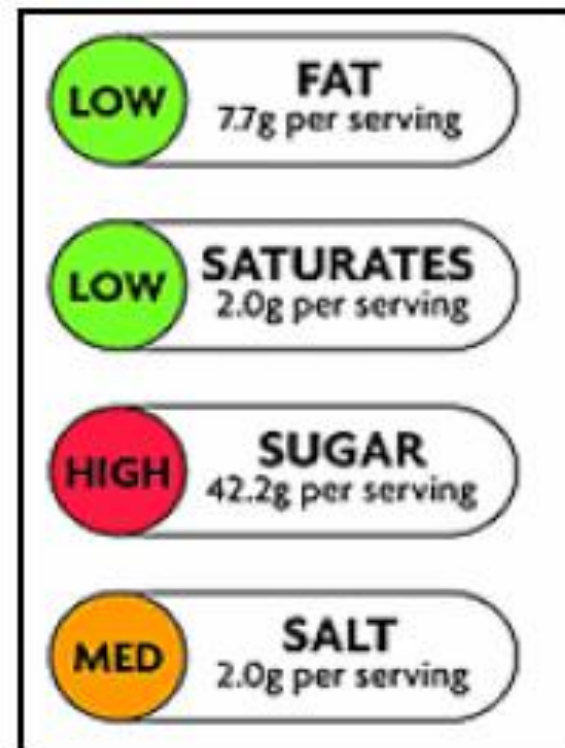
# Improving Consumer Understanding of Nutrition labelling

- 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

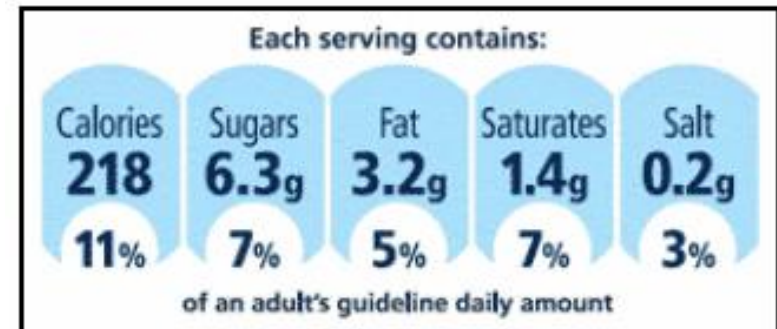
# Traffic Light Labelling

- ➔ 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



# Front-of-Pack Labelling & Consumers

- 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



# Future Research

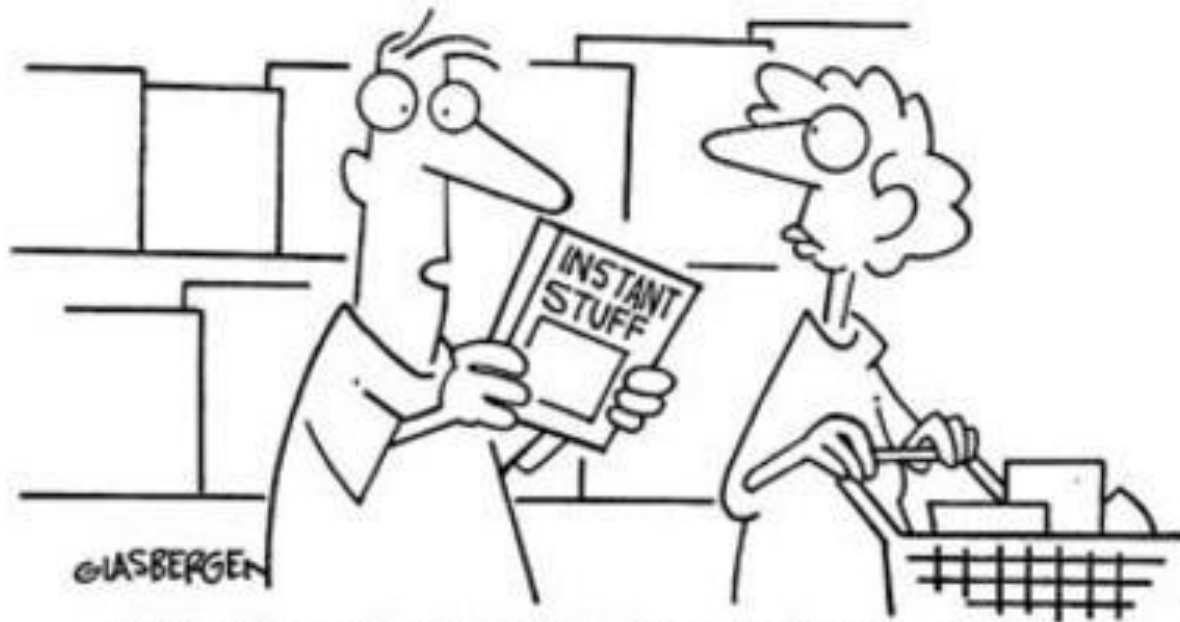
- More research is needed on consumer use and understanding of nutrition labels in countries other than the UK
- Use and understanding needs to be assessed in real-life situations
- Research is needed on what motivates consumers to use nutrition labels
- Identify interventions to increase label use and understanding
- Explore associations between label reading and diet quality

Grunert & Wills (2007).; Cowburn G., Stockley L. (2005).

# 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?

# Thank You



**“Finally, a food label I can understand!  
Each serving contains 10 grams  
of fat and 5 grams of thin.”**

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# Resources

- ❓ Bureau Européen des Unions de Consommateurs (2005). *Report on European Consumers' Perception of Foodstuffs Labelling*. Available at: [www.beuc.org](http://www.beuc.org).
- Campus et al. (2011). Nutrition Labels on pre-packaged Food: A systematic Review. *Public Health Nutrition*. Doi: 10.1017/S1368980010003290
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# Resources

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- Food Standards Agency (2005). *Signpost labelling: Creative Development of Concepts*. Gerard's Cross: Navigator. Available at: [www.food.gov.uk](http://www.food.gov.uk)
- Regulation (EU) No. 1169/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25th October 2011 on the Provision of Information to Consumers. Official Journal of EU L304/1
- 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

Regulation (EU) No. 1169/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25<sup>th</sup> October 2011 on the Provision of Information to Consumers. Official Journal of EU L304/18



# 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 80cm<sup>2</sup>)
- 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
- 1<sup>st</sup> 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