

Nutrition information
on food labels ??? a
waste of time and
money? assignment



NUTRITION INFORMATION ON FOOD LABELS ??? A WASTE OF TIME AND

MONEY? Nutrition information on food labels is very useful and helpful for consumers; it is not a waste of time. In this essay I will write about the history of food labelling and later I will concentrate on consumers who should read food labels and those consumers who read the food labels. After that, I will focus on the importance and the advantages that information on food labels have.

In the last part, I will write about problems that customers have when reading instructions on food labels. Food labels came legally to life in 1906. Everything started in the USA because the Food and Drug Act said that “ food labelling is needed to protect consumers from economic harm to reducing consumer’s risk of chronic disease”. In 1993, the Nutrition Labelling and Education Act (NLEA) required mandatory food labelling on most products excluding coffee, spices, raw foods and take away foods.

Regulations apply mostly to processed and packaged foods and require specific information on food labels like: name of the food, list of nutrients (fat, sodium, total carbohydrates, dietary fibre, proteins, vitamins A and C, some minerals, calories and Kilo calories), the name and address of the manufacturer, the place of origin, serving sizes, expiry date, nutrient content claims, health claims and information about Recommended Daily Intake (RDA) of nutrients while consuming 2000 calories.

In the European Union, legislation on food labelling wants to protect, inform and help society to make knowledgeable choices. Every manufacturer should provide the required information to ensure that consumers will be satisfied

when buying their products. Food labelling regulations help the consumer to buy safer food. People are more confident when choosing products if they know what a particular product consists of. Nowadays most of the nutritional labels are very advanced and show detailed information about each nutrient and ingredient.

Consumers read the labels mostly to improve their intake in good nutrients (proteins, fibre, good fat, vitamins and minerals) and minimize intake of unhealthy nutrients (saturated fat, sodium, cholesterol) that a particular product contains. Those who experience cardiovascular problems, are overweight and obese or have type 2 Diabetes should read nutrition labels very carefully to avoid high intake of nutrients which are significant risk in causing or worsening the illness.

Consumers who are allergic to certain foods use nutrition labels to find information about the ingredients that they must not to eat. The most common allergic foods are: milk, eggs, fish, shellfish, tree nuts, peanuts, wheat and soybeans. Some of the above foods may cause instant death or digestive problems like celiac disease or lactose intolerance. Also, the elderly people should read the labels to meet their dietary requirements, which differ from other age groups. Pregnant women should control their Vitamin A intake derived from animal organs and increase their intake in folic acid.

Vegetarian and vegan groups will find nutritional labels very useful particularly about the proteins and ingredients derived from animals.

Another group of consumer reads information on food labels for personal reasons, for instance to exclude genetically modified foods or religious

reasons. Research findings in different countries show that significant amounts of consumers use nutrition information on food labels. Surveys done in the United Kingdom have shown that 58% of those interviewed use nutrition labels.

Those people recognize their diet as an important part in their lives. 17% use the labels for nutritional advice. Another study in America has shown that society is interested in nutrition food labels and use them while shopping or at home. The research showed that people with more than high school education are more likely to read the labels. In Canada consumers with small financial income, the elderly and less educated were less likely to use and understand nutrition labels. In Australia and New Zealand, 34% of consumers read the nutrition food labels.

Significant groups of parents with young children usually use food labels to check the information about fat and sugar intake. Another advantage of nutrition information on food labels is that consumers look at the labels when buying unknown food products (for example from different parts of the world). It allows people to try exotic and extraordinary cuisines. Nutrition labels are guides to healthy eating and improving diet in beneficial nutrients. They help to avoid bad nutrients and remove bad products from our diets.

For instance, manufacturers must inform on food labels that the product contains hydrogenated fat which is more harmful than animal fat. Nutrition food labels draw our attention to healthiness. In America, surveys demonstrated that consumers compare food products to purchase the ones with lower fat and sodium amounts. Information on food labels positively

influences consumers that would like to prevent cardiovascular diseases and cancer. Those consumers choose low fat and low sugar products. There has been found a connection between reading the labels and losing weight.

In other words, people are more aware of what they eat and make their decisions consciously. Scientists from two American Universities estimated that “ the total monetary benefit of decrease in body weight was \$63 to \$ 166 billion over a 20-year period of the costs of the NLEA”. Food labels also help to reduce deficiency in certain nutrients. For example costumers who lack iron or fibre in their diet can easily choose food which is high in those nutrients while reading information on the back of the packaging. Legislation on food labels has brought another benefit for consumers.

Manufacturers have to follow the rules and cannot wrongly label products. The Food Standards Agency in America is responsible to protect customers against dishonest manufacturers. Retailers must label their product appropriately and must describe it correctly. Labelling food is not only good for consumers but also for manufacturers. They recognized that the more information they show on the labels the better product will sell. It is a great deal for consumers who can find out more details about new products. There is a campaign running around the world called “ 5 a day”.

With these words health organisations try to convince consumers to eat at least 5 portions of fruit and vegetables every day. Manufacturers and retailers in the UK joined the program and present the information on their food labels. The Information draws consumer awareness and helps them to realize that eating more fruits and vegetables will reduce the risk of certain

diseases like cardiovascular disease. Apart from regular nutrition information on food labels on the back of the packaging, manufacturers present some coloured, highlighted instructions in the front of the packaging.

This message is much easier for customers to understand than the directions from the back of the product. Usually the information shows the amount in grams per 1 serving and the percentage of daily intake of the nutrient (calories, fat, sugar, protein, sodium / salt). On the other hand, nutrition information on food labels needs some improvements. Food labels should all look the same and equally present the same list of nutrients with the same percentages and amounts. It will be easier for the consumer to memorise one kind of label.

Unfortunately, every manufacturer labels their products differently. Consumers do not have time to spend hours in a food store. For example, a co-op retailer in the UK presents its own labels which describe “ high, medium and low” to help consumers to choose healthier products and understand the label more. In fact, industry organisations see it as misleading information considering that these labels could be problematic to sell for example “ fat” in food which is indeed very beneficial to maintain balanced diet.

The next problem is that the consumers lack an understanding of the function of different nutrients presented on the labels. The European Heart Network found out that consumers widely read nutrition food labels but do not fully understand them. Often, amounts of nutrients require calculations and consumers do not have enough knowledge about the different nutrients

that are important in their diets. The Public Health Nutrition journal informed that converting information from grams to grams per serving size caused difficulties.

Nutrition labels should respond to consumer needs and give clear and simple instructions. In conclusion, nutrition information on food labels is not a waste of money. The idea of presenting this information is great because it helps customers to see what packaged food contains and choose the best product that suits them. The information on food labels gives instructions for people who are allergic and have food intolerances. It is also a guide for the consumer on how to start or maintain eating a balanced diet and how to avoid unhealthy and harmful nutrients.

However, nutrition information on food labels still needs improvement to enable better public understanding and this is an area that needs to be addressed. References: 1. Angela Shine, Seamus O'Reilly, Kathleen O'Sullivan (1997) "Consumer use of nutrition labels". British Food Journal, Vol: 99, Iss: 8, p: 290-296 2. Carolyn D. Berdanier... [et al.], (2002), "Handbook of nutrition and food", California, CRC Press. 3. European Public Health Alliance, (2005) "Food labelling in the EU: purposes, principles and challenges" URL: <http://www. epha. org/a/2006> 4.

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