Food label reading: Read before you eat

Sir,

Nutrition information on food labels is regarded as a major means for encouraging consumers to make healthier choices when shopping for food.[1,2] However, do consumers notice such labels, do they read and understand them, and do they make use of them in their purchasing decisions? A range of consumer research studies[3-5] have tried to shed light on these questions.

Nutrition information on food labels is an important source of nutrition information but is typically underutilized by consumers. Nutrition information on food labels could be a cost-effective method of communicating nutrition information to consumers because the information appears at the point of sale for most packaged foods.[6] Although consumers value nutrition when deciding which foods to buy,[7] nutrition information on food labels is complex and does not always live up to its potential to communicate effectively.[8-11]

To the same context, a survey was done to find out if consumers, in Indore city, have knowledge of nutrition information on food package labels when shopping and to what extent they use that knowledge to choose foods to buy. A total of 838 individuals participated in the survey. The results provide information on consumers' awareness, knowledge, and use of food labels, as well as their ability to interpret nutrition information appropriately and make food choices accordingly. These results are expected to help in explaining the reasons that contribute to food choices made by consumers and in coming up with recommendations that will guarantee that consumers are well informed on the nutrition information and can use it whenever they want. The findings of this survey could form the basis for a mass population approach for future information and education strategies for health professionals and other stakeholders interested in consumer awareness activities.

The findings of our survey indicate that the majority (71.9%) of the participants claimed that they do not use a shopping list and more than half of them (61.8%) indicated that their choice of specific foods was not based on nutrition information. The same trend has been observed with respect to the use of nutrition information when shopping, where only 9.3% of the consumers claimed that they utilize that knowledge when shopping.

While consumers are checking labels, they do not necessarily understand what they are reading. Half of the world's consumers said they only "partly" understand the nutritional labels on food, with 60% of Asia–Pacific's citizens leading the world in this lack of understanding followed by Europeans (50%) and Latin Americans (45%). In our study, 57.7% consumers "don't understand" the food labels, whereas 39.7% "partially understand" the food labels information.

Nutrition labels typically contain information on calories, serving size, and amounts and/or daily values of several macronutrients, vitamins, and minerals (e.g., fats, carbohydrate, and calcium).

In our survey, 52.5% consumers do not read the ingredients' list written on the food label. The US Dietary Guidelines 2010 states that "The ingredients list can be used to find out whether a food or beverage contains synthetic trans fats, solid fats, added sugars, whole grains, and refined grains." Ingredient lists contain important nutrition information that can contribute to the consumer's assessment of a food's healthfulness.

The ultimate purpose of nutrition labeling information is to assist consumers in identifying and choosing foods that contribute to a healthy diet. A nutrition labeling education strategy should, therefore, be integrated into broader behavior change strategies related to nutrition education and health to assist consumers in bridging the gap between current dietary practices and dietary recommendations. Information does not lead to behavioral change unless it can overcome counteracting psychosocial, behavioral, and environmental barriers. The underlying problems include lack of adequate nutrition education and knowledge and poor communication to end users.

In conclusion, we found low use and understanding of nutrition labels among consumers in Indore city. Consumers were not conversant with the numeracy, terminology, and language on the current nutrition panel, pointing toward the need for basic nutrition education and user-friendly label formats.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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