

## **The Evolution of Food Labeling: How are Labeling Practices Going to Affect Consumers?**

By Monisha Panda

Submitted to SDA website: 04/14/2008

Nutrition labeling for foods began back in the 1970s by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The Nutrition Labeling and Education Act (NLEA), passed by Congress in 1990, directed the FDA to develop mandatory regulations in order to settle consumers' and manufacturers' concerns over the credibility of nutrition information presented on food labels. The tool's purpose now rests on its ability to educate consumers about the key nutrients found in foods to prevent deficiencies in order to maintain good health and reduce the risk of disease. Presently, nutrition labeling supplies information to meet the dietary recommendations for the general population. It is not meant to address the needs of person with conditions such as renal insufficiency and individual needs varying by age in a person's life cycle. Not only does nutrition labeling serve tool to educate consumers on eating healthfully, it also encouraged manufacturers to produce foods with better nutrient profiles to meet the needs of different people. Such products had nutrient profiles which were low in sodium or low in fat (Taylor et al, 2008; 108(3)).

The Nutrition Facts panel served as a marketing tool for food manufacturers and retailers. Food manufacturers and retailers are now using the entire food label to communicate nutrient content claims, such as "low in fat" or "high in calcium", and health claims, which state relationships between the consumption of certain nutrients and reducing risk of disease (Taylor et al, 2008; 108(4)). The food label is rapidly evolving into a canvas of symbols and rating systems to provide consumers with icons indicating certain nutrition qualities which consumers are seeking (Tuttle, 2008).

The Nutrition Facts panel found on the side or back of food products serves as the basic building block of nutrition labeling. It provides the required declaration of key nutrient values in foods. It also serves as the basic information needed to make nutrient content and health claims found on other parts of the food product's label (Taylor, 2008; 108(3)). The International Food Information Council (IFIC) conducted a Food and Health Survey in 2007 and found that two-thirds of consumers check the Nutrition Facts panel making food choices while shopping. Even though it would seem this would be an effective tool in changing consumer behavior, focus groups, which have been conducted by the IFIC and other organizations, found that most people have a limited understanding and are confused by food labels. So the Nutrition Facts panel is beneficial to consumers who are "nutritionally savvy" and know how to use the information presented on it (Tuttle, 2008).

For consumers who are not as "nutritionally savvy," health claims and nutrient content claims (such as "low fat", "fat-free", "high fiber") have been used by food manufacturers to communicate nutrition information to consumers. However, the claims also have been found to be difficult for consumers to understand. As a result, food manufacturers, retailers, trade associations, and health organizations started developing nutrition icons, logos, and rating systems to come up with more consumer-friendly labeling practices (Tuttle, 2008).

Some examples of nutrition symbols include the "Smart Spot" by PepsiCo products, Eat Smart and Drink Smart by Unilever, Hannaford's Guiding Stars, the American Heart Association's Heart-Check Mark, the National Dairy Council's 3-A-Day, and the Overall Nutrition Quality Index (ONQI) currently being patented by Yale's Griffin Hospital (Tuttle,

2008). There are two categories these symbol-rating systems fall into: “fact-based” and “better-for-you.” The nutrition symbols which fall into the “fact-based” category remains based on scientific evidence used to provide labeling criteria by the FDA and United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). An above mentioned system which falls into this category is the National Dairy Council’s 3-A-Day logo. Kelloggs’ and General Mills’ system also fall into this category because they repeat information found on the Nutrition Facts panel on the front of the food label. The nutrition symbols which fall into the “better-for-you” category generally are designed to help consumers compare products to choose healthier options. Due to there being so many symbol systems, usually consumers are only able to choose healthier products within a company’s own product line (Tuttle, 2008). The Hannaford’s Guiding Stars and the ONQI systems are good examples of this category. Consumers using Hannaford’s Guiding Stars are only able to compare products using this system and would not be able to compare it to products using a system such a ONQI.

Experts are arguing whether putting repeated information (fact-based category) from the Nutrition Facts panel on the front of a food label actually helps consumers who are not aware of basic nutrition and labeling concepts (Tuttle, 2008). The “better-for-you” programs have been debated as well. The “better-for-you” programs do not have an emphasis concerning serving sizes. While the product may carry a “better-for-you” logo, consumers may be eating in excessive of the recommended serving size because they assume these products are healthier when in reality the only reason the product qualifies for the logo is because the serving size is much smaller. Another con of this system is that companies are making the decision whether a food is healthy or not. It is taking the decision out of the hands of consumers, and unless a consumer is motivated enough to go to the companies’ website to understand their rating systems, many do not understand what the criteria are for the systems (Tuttle, 2008).

Nutrition educators feel that all the symbols and systems found on a food label are only confusing consumers more since there is not one guide or reference to explain what everything means. Also, what some systems say actually conflict with what others say. An example of this is the ONQI system, which rates a product by giving it a number on a scale from 1 to 100. A product could have a high score yet still not meet the government’s regulations for what can be called “healthy” (Tuttle, 2008). Knowing this dietitians need to ask: how are current labeling practices going to affect consumers’ food choices? They may possibly confuse and frustrate consumers who are not familiar with nutrition concepts. How are the responsibilities of a registered dietitian affected by all the icons and nutrition rating systems being developed? Nutrition symbols probably will not be disappearing any time soon so registered dietitians need to be familiar with the rating systems and symbols which are continuously appearing on products at the supermarket. Most of these icons are only highlighting the positive attributes of products since they are being used by food manufacturers and retailers as a marketing tool to target nutrition-concerned consumers (Tuttle, 2008). Dietitians need to be able to educate their clients in understanding how to make healthful food choices while shopping by considering a well-balanced diet. This may require simply teaching clients to use the Nutrition Facts panel and ingredient statements on the back of food products and helping them to understand the health benefits or consequences of nutrients contained in certain foods. Education may require consumers to visit the websites of companies which have developed their own systems in order to understand the pros and cons of each system. This will help consumers to understand that a symbol on the front of a package may not be telling them essential information about a product and that they need to learn how to use the food guide pyramid more effectively.

References:

1. Taylor, CL., Wilkening VL. How the Nutrition Food Label Was Developed, Part 1: The Nutrition Facts Panel. *Journal of the American Dietetics Association*. 2008; 108(3): 437-442.
2. Taylor, CL., Wilkening VL. How the Nutrition Food Label Was Developed, Part 2: The Purpose and Promise of Nutrition Claims. *Journal of the American Dietetics Association*. 2008; 108(4): 618-623.
3. Tuttle, M. Seeing Spots in the Supermarket? Learn How Nutrition Symbols Influence Which Foods We Buy. *ADA Times*. 2008; 5(4): 12-16.