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# FOOD LABELLING - A BOON

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**Abstract**

In recent times focus on food labelling has increased all over the world. The aim of food labelling is regarded as a major means for encouraging consumers to make healthier choices while shopping for food. The nutrients mentioned in food products are important for maintaining good health and preventing from problems developing. In order to safeguard the interest of the consumers, the food safety and standards (packaging and labelling) regulations, 2011, provides that every packaged food article has to be labelled and it should provide the information such as name of the food, ingredients, nutritional information, declaration regarding veg or non-veg, food additives, net quantity, best before and use by date, instructions for use, name and complete address of the manufacturer or packer and country of origin. Hence, nutrition labelling is helpful in preventing consumers from becoming obese and also in chronic conditions like high blood pressure, diabetes, various types of cancer and cardio vascular diseases etc., and therefore further research is needed for the health and well-being of the consumers. Thus this paper describes the importance of nutrition labelling for the prevention of chronic diseases in India.

**Key Words**- Food labelling, Prevention, Consumers, Chronic diseases, Health

## Introduction

Food labelling is an important communication tool between consumers and food manufacturers. Consumer's ability to read and understand information on a food label is vital. Food labelling information is legally regulated and food regulatory authorities are using the information to protect the consumer's by providing clear, honest and correct information about the product to the consumers. The Food Safety and Standards (Packaging and labelling) regulations, 2011, provides that every packaged food article has to be labelled and it should provide information such as name of the food, ingredients, nutritional information, declaration regarding veg or non-veg, food additives, net quantity, best before and use by date, instructions for use, name and complete address of the manufacturer or packer and country of origin. Food product labelling, as a

policy tool for ensuring provision of nutrition and health information to consumers and as product differentiation strategy by food companies, has gained importance in the recent past across the globe (Kim et al, 2001) [1].

The nutrition facts label which is familiar today was amended as early as in the year 1913 to protect consumers. This concept was expanded in the Nutrition Labelling and Education Act (NLEA) of 1990, which enforced food manufacturers to provide nutrient information. A healthy diet is important throughout the life time and paying attention to nutrition label is wiser toward improving the overall diet. According to Shine et al (1997) [2], in recent years increased interest in nutritional issues has been fuelled by a number of factors including lifestyle, ageing population, dietary and safety concerns. As consumers are becoming increasingly concerned about on the food they eat its effects on their health, the food industry has responded by providing more detailed nutrition information on their food labels(Petrovici et al, 2012) [3]. Nutrition label provides key information such as serving size, calories, total fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, protein, carbohydrate and vitamin content. This information helps the consumers to stay on track with their nutritional targets. It also helps to restrict particular ingredients like sodium, saturated fat, added sugars and calories to get away from the onset of obesity and other chronic disease incidence.

**Mandatory Requirements of Food Labelling**

Labels are one of the most important features of product packaging, and they are designed to communicate a message(Heroux et al, 1988) [4]. Petruccelli (1996) [5] indicates that mandatory labelling reduces the confusion among firms and consumers, leading to better market performance and also increases in informed consumption behaviour(Golan et al, 2001) [6].

Underwood et al, 2001,[7] found that packaging elements act as a tool for differentiation. This helps consumers to choose the product from a wide range of similar products and stimulates customers buying behaviour. The research findings of Rita, 2009 [8] concludes that a package could be treated as one of the most valuable tool in today's marketing communications, necessitating more detailed analysis of its elements. The impact of package and its elements on consumers purchase decision can be revealed by analysing the importance of its separate elements for consumer's choice.

**The Name of Food**

Every pre-packaged food shall carry a label containing information as required under these regulations unless otherwise provided; the name of the food shall be the common or generic name which may additionally include trade name or description of food contained in the package.

**List of Ingredients**

Food labels should list the main ingredients, additives and condiments added to food (Wandel, 1997) [9] and quality of the ingredients(Dimara et al, 2005) [10], in order to be more informative to the consumer. The desire to maintain good health is of prime concern and consumers read labels to obtain information about ingredients and nutrition. (Wills et al, 2009) [11].

**Nutritional Information and claims**

Nutrition information is the section of information on food labels is an important source of information but is typically underutilized by consumers which contain information on calories, serving size, and amounts and/ or the daily values of several

macronutrients, vitamins and minerals (e.g., fats, carbohydrates and calcium).

Food labels may contain health claims, indicating the relationship between specific nutrients and diseases or health conditions(Wilkening, 1996:10; SA, 2007:76), [12,13] as well as nutrient content and function claims. Nutrient content claims describe the amount of a nutrient present in food, whereas function claims illustrate the claimed physiological role of a certain nutrient or substance in development, growth and other functions of the body (SA, 2007:76, 78) [13]. South African research indicates that health and nutrient content claims serve as a valuable source of information on food, influencing the purchasing behaviour of some consumers (Klein, 2005:99) [14]. Overweight people and those who are intolerant or allergic to particular ingredients are also interested in these attributes, as they have specific nutritional need related to their diet conditions.

**Declaration regarding Veg/Non- Veg**

India has a large audience for both veg and non - veg food, but some of the communities not entertained non-veg food, also there are people who have their personal preference for 'Veg only' food items. To safeguard the interest and the sentiments of such people a food product label must have the identification mark "Veg" or "Non-Veg" for the category of food.

According to FSSAI, it is mandatory to indicate that the product contains vegetarian ingredient or non-vegetarian ingredient by means of symbols. Green colour filled circle in a square should indicate vegetarian and brown coloured filled circle in a brown colour square indicate non- vegetarian food.

**Food Additives**

"Food additive" means any substance which is added to food for a technological (including organoleptic) purpose in the manufacture, processing, preparation or treatment of such food, but does not include contaminants.

In a study by Wandel (1997:215) [9], 60% of the respondents who read labels paid particular attention to food additives, which indicates the importance of this information to consumers.

**Name and Complete Address of the Manufacturer**

The name and address of the local manufacturer, packer or vendor should be printed on the labels of foods of local origin. Hu et al, (2006) [15] found that labels are one of the most important features of product packaging, and they are designed to communicate a message.

**Net Quantity**

The net quantity of the food present in the package is required to be declared on the label.

**Lot/Code Number**

Code number may be comprised of letters, numbers or symbols; may refer to the place of manufacture, time of manufacture, or product identity(USDA/FSIS 2011) [16].

**Date of Manufacturer**

"Date of manufacturer" means the date on which the food becomes the product as described. Date marking is an important piece of information for manufacturers, retailers and consumers to maintain food safety and quality.

**Best Before/ Use by Date**

The "best before" labelling relates primarily to the food quality rather than to food safety and it is an appropriate date labelling for most foods. "Use by" is the last date recommended for the use of the product while at peak quality. "Use by" and "Best if used by" are intended to assure consistent food quality. This type of dating provides guidance to the consumer.

The expiration date is the date up to which the food maintains its microbiological and physical

stability, and the nutrient content. The risk of food-borne diseases increases after the expiration date, especially if the storage conditions are less than optimal(Christine Murebwayire, 2014) [17].

**Country of Origin**

Country of origin labelling is basically for the traceability of food products and also to fulfil the demand of mandatory labelling. This reflects a common belief that local, or near local produce is not only safer, better tasting, and of superior quality, but it is also easier to verify its quality(Philip et al, 2010) [18].

**Price**

Price is one of the most important labels for most consumers, and one that influences their food purchasing decisions. Charles, (2002) [19] revealed in his study that 70% of purchasing decision is based on price.

**Role of Food Labelling Information**

According to available literature, the term food label is very broad covering a range of signposts and panels found on packages of food products. Food labels are believed to have an effect on food choices and dietary behaviour(Mackison, Wrieden& Anderson, 2010) [20].

Food label is a legal requirement which has to be fulfilled by food processing companies for the consumer's better health and safety(Ababio et al, 2012) [21]. According to the food safety and regulatory authority of India (2011), the nutritional information is necessary on food label along with the name, expiry date, manufacturing date and ingredients. The main objective of the food regulation is to protect consumer health and maintain consumer dietary quality. This also directs the consumer in pre-purchase and post-purchase decision making (Van der Merwe et al, 2014) [22].

Food labels information assists consumer to better understand the nutritional value of food and enables them to compare the nutritional value of similar food products and to make healthy informed food choices based on the relevant nutrition information (AL Tamimi and Company, 2004) [23]. An effective food label play multidimensional role like providing nutritional information (Grunert and wills, 2007 and Mackison et al, 2010) [24, 20], control food related allergies(Voordous et al, 2009) [25] and aids in food safety by providing the expiry date (Sanlier and Karakus, 2010) [26].The importance of nutritional information in food label was proved by the Vaal University of Technology by developing an immune enhancing power bar(Roger et al, 2009) [27]. Thus the food label is necessary to facilitate informed choice and to prevent false, misleading or unreliable conduct (Rumble et al, 2003) [28].

**Importance of Nutritional Information on Food Label**

To decide on the product to be purchased depends upon the nutrition label. Nutrition information on food label is regarded as a major means for encouraging consumers to make healthier choices when shopping for food (Baltas and Cheftel, 2005) [29-30]. Many studies deciphered that nutritional information has a fundamental role in achieving a healthy life style in people (Wills et al, 2009) [11] and also the best ways for delivering health messages on nutrition and diet to consumer (Tudoran et al, 2009) [31].

Several results indicated the consumer opinions about use of food label as well as the benefits related to food label. There are some consumers who have their opinion that nutritional information on food label is trustworthy (Campos et al, 2011) [32], some of them have their point of view that presence of nutritional information on food label assure the quality of food (Svederberg and Wendin, 2011) [33] and

healthiness and few consumer comment that food label provide health information very positively (Bosman et al, 2014) [34]. However, the increasing number of food processing companies and availability of several package foods in the market have made consumer confused in decision making process and also helped consumer in better food selection (Prinsloo et al, 2012) [35].

**Nutritional Label on Pre-Packaged Foods Aids/Restricts Nutrients in Therapeutic Conditions**

Nutrition labelling information is very important/ useful for people who are in special diet or with food/nutrition related health problems and diseases such as obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and various types of cancers as it helps them to be informed in their choices of food(Washi, 2012) [36]. Different people have different food/nutritional requirements, choices and preferences. Some people have health problems that require certain amount of nutrients high in vitamins, minerals and fiber. Whereas, some have health issues which require them to stay away from certain food ingredients like foods high in fat, sodium or calories (Todd et al, 2018) [37]. According to Lin et al (2004) [38]respondents who had higher intakes of total fat, saturated fat, or cholesterol were less likely to report looking for label information on these nutrients. Some studies have also unfolded the fact, that nutrition label guide the consumer and patients who are suffering from chronic diseases to obey the dietary recommendation available on label in the form of nutritional information (Rothman et al, 2006) [39]. Label users seem to exhibit a greater concern about their diet and health (Govindasamy& Italia, 1999; Cowburn & Stockley, 2005; Drichoutis et al , 2006; Svederberg et al, 2011) [40-42], have a positive attitude and greater nutrition knowledge of diet-disease relationship(Marietta et al, 1999; Drichoutis et al, 2006; Misra, 2007 [42-44], place more importance on following the dietary guidelines and agree that what ones eat can affect the risk of getting a chronic disease such as cancer or heart disease(Neuhouser et al, 1999; Nayga, 2000; Satia et al, 2005) [45-47], have diets that are lower in fat (Neuhouser et al, 1999; Misra, 2007) [44,45] and cholesterol and higher in fruits and vegetables (Neuhouser et al, 1999; Misra; 2007) [44,45] compared to non-users.

Health problems due to nutrition and dietary habits, including obesity and overweight, exert a high burden on the society which leads to health epidemic problems in the 21 ' century (Fisberg et al, 2004) [48]. Nutrition labelling is widely regarded as one of the most promising instruments for fighting and preventing rising obesity rates (Baltas, 2001) [29]. Various studies have modelled the potential impact of nutrition labels on dietary intake or obesity in Europe. As an example Sassi et al, [49] estimated that a mandatory nutrition labelling system for food sold in stores would decrease obesity rates in Europe by 2.5% compared to baseline situation where no such labelling existed. Food labelling alone is not enough to alter eating behaviours, it can be used as an important motivating tool, that if used effectively, can assist in combatting obesity and nutrition related chronic disease (Ollberding et al, 2010) [50].

Understanding the information provided on food labels can allow people with diabetes a better chance of achieving a healthy diet and control of their blood glucose levels. The current labelling system, Recommended Daily Allowance (RDA) or Guideline Daily Amounts (GDA) helps to cut back the excess levels of carbohydrates when consumers buy pre-packaged foods. Weaver and Finke (2003) [51]

studied the effect of nutritional label use on sugar composition. They found that consumers always using information on nutrition facts panel consume less of their total energy in form of added sugars than who do not use the labels. Some consumers consume too much of salt and fats rich in saturated fats and cholesterol which leads to chronic diseases like increased blood pressure and cardio vascular disease thus, reading food labels helps them to avoid packaged foods rich in those nutrient dense foods.

Establishment of safety hygiene and quality of food products have been mentioned as major means for considering food labels. Further, many researchers have concluded that special dietary status has a significant effect on the willingness to pay for nutritional information on food items(Caswell and Padberg, 1999; Govindasamy and Italia, 1999) [40,52].

## Conclusion

The author concludes that though there are many parameters in food label helpful to improve dietary patterns of the consumers, to restricts/ aids in special diets require a sustained nutritional information facts to be given in a way that is both meaningful and useful to the average consumer and the government should conduct research so as to decide on the information to be disclosed. The nutrition label is an important vehicle that food manufacturers can use to communicate essential information about the nutritional value and composition of their product to the consumers (Wills et al, 2009) [11]. Food manufacturers have to be encouraged to use nutrition labels to a greater extent. Since time spent on shopping is quite limited for many people in today's world, nutrition labels should be designed so as to enable consumers understand the relevant information quickly and easily. Educational information about the benefits and use of nutrition labels should be offered to the general public at point of purchase in grocery stores, supermarkets, and other food retailers. Consumers require assistance in distinguishing between accurate information and false or misleading information (Abbott, 1997:43) [53]. Therefore, there is a need for more consumer education programmes on food labelling in order to understand food labelling information better and use it correctly in their decision making when purchasing food products.

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