

Will food soon carry a new nutrient label?

WASHINGTON, D.C. — USDA and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) are studying several new nutrition label formats which would give consumers information in a form that is easier to read and understand.

Formal discussion about the need for nutrient labeling began at the 1969 White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health. Regulations were drafted over the next few years and went into effect in 1975. FDA requires nutrient labeling only on products to which nutrients are added or about which claims relating to nutrition are made. Other products may voluntarily include nutritional information on their labels.

USDA does not have its own nutrient labeling regulations for processed meat and poultry products, but uses FDA's format or an abbreviated version on a voluntary basis. USDA maintains the same nutrient labeling regulations as FDA's for egg products.

Nutrient labels on products regulated by FDA must list serving size, number of servings per container, number of calories per serving, the quantity of macronutrients (protein, fat and carbohydrate) expressed in grams per serving, and the amount of eight nutrients (protein, vitamin A, vitamin C, thiamine, riboflavin, niacin, calcium, and iron) expressed as percentages of the U.S. Recommended Daily Allowance (U.S. RDA). Declaring quantities of 12 additional vitamins and minerals is voluntary. USDA uses this same format and also allows an abbreviated one listing just the quantities of macronutrients and calories on meat and poultry products.

In 1978, FDA's Food Labeling and Package Surveillance Survey found that over 44 percent of the

dollar volume of packaged processed foods sold in retail stores carried nutrient labeling. Approximately one-third of all national brands of those products surveyed had nutrient labeling, notes economist Kathleen Reidy of USDA's Economic Research Service in an article appearing in the agency's NATIONAL FOOD REVIEW magazine.

In 1979, USDA, FDA, and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) concluded that the current nutrient label could be more understandable and useful to consumers. Several problems with the nutrient label have been pointed out by experts and confirmed by recent consumer surveys:

— Many concepts on the label are complex. Terms such as riboflavin, thiamine, niacin, and U.S. RDA are not likely to be understood by most consumers.

— The different measurements (household measures, grams, percentages of U.S. RDA) used on the label may be confusing or make the comparison of nutrients complicated.

— The quantity of information presented on the label may be an overload for most consumers. If too much information is presented, consumers are unable to absorb, comprehend, and use it in making nutrition-related product evaluations.

— The information on the label is not organized for optimal communication. It is not grouped by type of information, and elements of public health concern are not emphasized.

Creating a simple and effective nutrient label is complicated for several reasons. Nutrition is a young science and, therefore, much disagreement exists among professionals. New discoveries, ideas, and possible links of various dietary elements to health

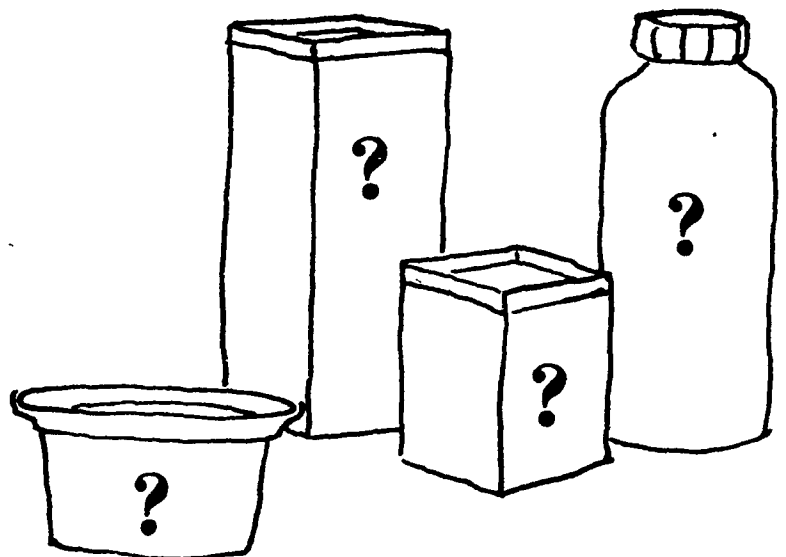
problems are constantly coming to light. But nutrition is an area where many factors interact and it may be difficult to prove cause and effect. While an average or optimal intake can be suggested, a large number of variables play roles in any given individual's nutrient needs, including age, sex, body size, metabolism, genetic makeup, state of health, and degree of physical activity.

Still, an individual consumer wants the nutrition information that relates to his or her specific health needs and concerns. For example, consumers with heart disease may be particularly concerned with a food's fat and cholesterol content, while those with hypertension may be concerned with sodium content.

The problem of selecting information to present is compounded by the varied audience receiving the information. Consumers have different degrees of concern and expertise about nutrition and varying abilities to read, understand, and incorporate nutrition information into their behavior patterns.

Since 1978, USDA, FDA, and the FTC have conducted a series of opinion surveys of food industry people, professional nutritionists, and consumers to better understand problems with the current food labeling, including the nutrient label, and to get suggestions for changes. In 1979, the three agencies published tentative positions on food labeling in the Federal Register and requested written comments from the public.

In 1980, Robert P. Gersin Associates, a New York design firm, was awarded a contract by FDA to design an array of nutrient labels that are simple, clear, and easily understood. The firm designed several formats after



consultation with nutritionists and experts in the food industry. The goal was to devise technically accurate formats that minimize presentation cost, invite use by consumers, are applicable to all food products and packages, and are adaptable to future needs. A final decision about a design will be made later after further research.

Several specific changes were recommended to correct the flaws of the existing label. Using the nutrient label for frozen pizza as an example, proposed changes are:

— Combine "nutrition information per serving" and "serving size - 1/4 pizza" to "nutrients per 1/4 pizza," and eliminate statement of "servings per container" from nutrient label.

— List protein content only once. Currently, it is listed in both grams and percentage of U.S. RDA.

— Change the term "percentage of U.S. Recommended Daily Allowances" to "percent to daily allowance."

— Make optional the listing of

some micronutrients that are now mandatory—riboflavin, thiamine, niacin, and those present in the product at less than 2 percent of the U.S. RDA.

— Add information of public health concern to the label, such as the sodium content of the food.

— Rearrange some information. For example, put calories and fat at top of label.

— Group information by category, perhaps using lines to separate, making individual nutrients easier to find.

— Encourage the emphasis of high priority items such as calories by perhaps using boldface print.

In addition to considering these modifications, the design firm also looked at several methods of presenting the information using different combinations of words, numbers, and graphs, as well as different bases of calculating the amounts of various nutrients contained in products—the amount of iron per serving, per calories, or per 100 grams.

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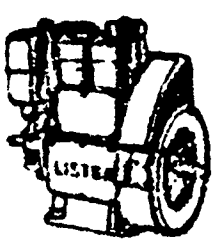
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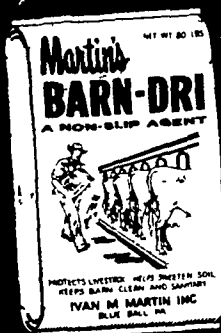
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