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LIVING WELL

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NutriScene

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Nutrition labelling can be a useful educational tool for you.

IN the concluding paragraph of my previous instalment, I had emphasised that the public has a major role in overcoming nutritional disorders.

What does this mean to you? It means that you'll have to actively take steps to look after your nutritional well-being, and that includes your family. No amount of government programmes or activities by professional bodies are ever going to be enough. The public must acquire the appropriate nutrition knowledge and take charge from there.

Nutrition information on food labels can be a source of such knowledge. This week, I will focus on the effective use of nutrition labelling by consumers. In a later article, I will discuss another aspect of nutrition information on food labels, namely nutrition and health claims.

Nutrition labelling or nutrient declaration describes the nutrient content of a food product. The nutrients are declared as a table in one section of a food label, commonly known as a nutrition information panel or NIP (see sample panel on the right).

Making effective use of nutrition labelling



Make it a habit to look at the nutrition labels when you shop for food.

The NIP, which focuses on nutritional quality, when factually and informatively provided, can assist the consumer in making better food choices when planning their daily meals. Such information serves to remind the consumer to think of the nutritional quality of a food in addition to other information on food packaging, such as ingredients, storage conditions, instructions for use and date marking. Nutrition labelling can indeed be a useful educational tool.

Diet & Nutrition

Understanding nutrition labelling

The Ministry of Health enforced a law on mandatory nutrition labelling of pre-packaged processed foods from 2005. I would urge consumers to understand the main features of this regulation in order to make effective use of such information.

What foods require mandatory nutrition labelling?

- 50 categories of commonly consumed foods, including: prepared cereal food and bread; milk products; flour confection; canned meat, fish and vegetable; canned fruit and various fruit juices; salad dressing and mayonnaise
- Foods making nutrition claims
- Foods that have been fortified or enriched with specific vitamins or minerals

Can other foods have nutrition labelling?

Yes! The labelling format and requirements must be in compliance with the said regulations.

What are the nutrients that must be declared?

- Energy
- Protein
- Carbohydrate
- Fat

How must these four nutrients be declared?

- kcal (for energy) or g (for the other three nutrients) per 100 g (for solid foods) or per 100 ml (for liquid foods).
- Energy and nutrients must also be declared in each serving of a food and the serving size should be stated
- Total sugar content in a ready-to-drink beverage must be declared
Optional nutrients that are present in the product may be declared, with the conditions:
- Vitamins and minerals, if it is present in significant amounts (at least 5% of the



Nutrition information		
Serving size: 200ml		
Servings per package: 5		
	Per 100 ml	Per serving (200 ml)
Energy (kcal)	100	200
(kj)	420	840
Carbohydrate (g)	23.8	47.6
Total sugar (g)	11.5	23.0
Protein (g)	1.1	2.2
Fat (g)	0	0

nutrient reference value per serving). The format for declaration is the same as that for the mandatory nutrients, i.e. in per 100 g or per 100 ml and per serving.

Optional nutrients that may be declared: dietary fibre, cholesterol and sodium. There are no conditions for minimum amounts that must be present. (Note: Readers may wish to refer to the Guide to Nutrition Labelling and Claims published by the Ministry of Health or to the actual regulations. An electronic version of the said Guide is available on the Nutrition Society of Malaysia website www.nutriweb.org.my)

Use nutrition labelling wisely

Nutrition labelling can be a useful source of nutrition information. It provides information on the amount of energy and other nutrients in the product you are contemplating to purchase. You can then consider how this food contributes to the total nutrient intake of the day. Talk to a nutritionist or dietitian about your energy and nutrient intake requirements for the day.

Nutrition labelling will also enable you to compare the nutrient profile of the different brands available for the same food item. Be guided by the content of all the nutrients provided on the label, not merely the level of one nutrient, for example fat.

Nutrition labelling can stimulate you to think of "nutrition", not just when you are purchasing processed foods, but also when you are making choices for fresh food, cooked meals, as well as when you are preparing your daily meals.

Educate your older children who tag along when you go shopping in supermarkets. Show them the nutrition information on the label and the significance of the nutrients and the values declared. Children must be familiar with nutrition even in their early years and let nutrition principles guide them to a healthier future.

I recall being asked in one seminar when I spoke about nutrition labelling: "The United States has enforced compulsory nutrition labelling for all processed foods for more than 10 years, and yet the obesity rate is still on the rise; does that not show that nutrition labelling has failed?" This question highlights the importance of getting the public to be educated on nutrition labelling and how to use this information effectively in their daily food choices.

Avoiding all the foods declared with high fat content is not going to solve the problem of obesity, or for that matter, any diet-related chronic diseases.

More importantly, it must be recognised that nutrition labelling is not going to provide the answers to all the nutritional ills. It is only one of the nutrition education tools.

The nutrient content of a single food must be considered in the context of the total diet. A food does not make up a meal, much less the daily nutritional requirement.

It does not mean that a food that is higher in fat should be totally shunned and that you should repeatedly purchase large amounts of a food with better nutritional qualities.

I repeat what I have said before: it's a variety of foods that make up a diet. It's a variety of foods that is more likely to provide all the nutrients and food components that you need. Healthy eating does not mean totally omitting a particular food from your diet.

Enhancing effective usage of nutrition labelling

Now that nutrient declaration has been made compulsory for almost a year, the authorities may wish to reflect upon its implementation and its impact on the consumers.

The first thing one may ask is: Do most of the stipulated food categories now carry the required nutrition labelling? Are companies having difficulty (for example lack of technical expertise) in complying with the regulation?

Nutrition labelling can be a useful educational tool for you

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Making effective use of nutrition labelling

The main concern should be the use of such nutrient declaration to consumers, who are the primary target of this exercise. Do consumers understand the information placed on a NIP? Do they know how to use such information? How have consumers used such information? What improvements do we need to make in this matter?

These questions need to be addressed to enable nutrient declaration more easily understood, meaningful and useful to the consumer. Some countries are considering having sign posting (for example a "traffic light" system which provides further guidance to the nutrient content of a food item), in addition to nutrient declaration.

Some countries, through non-governmental organisations, have implemented symbols and logos on products that meet certain criteria such as low in fat, sugar or cholesterol.

Some of these systems have been controversial and their usefulness challenged. We should look at countries having such programmes and learn from their experiences and challenges.

Whatever additional nutrition information we may want on the label must be beneficial to the consumer. This requires thorough consultation with all stakeholders.

Be nutrition labelling savvy

I would urge all consumers to report on companies that do not follow the nutrition labelling law. The nutrition labelling regulation has been enacted for the purpose of providing nutrition information factually to consumers.

I would urge you to make use of such information placed on the labels, effectively. Tell the authorities your experiences with nutrition labelling information.

In the next article, I will share with readers the main features of the new law regulating nutrition and health claims in the country. The public must know what are the permitted claims and what are not.

■ *NutriScene is a fortnightly column by Dr Tee E Siong, who pens his thoughts as a nutritionist with 34 years of experience in the research and public health arena. For further information, e-mail starhealth@thestar.com.my. The information provided is for educational and communication purposes only and it should not be construed as personal medical advice. Information published in this article is not intended to replace, supplant or augment a consultation with a health professional regarding the reader's own medical care. The Star does not give any warranty on accuracy, completeness, functionality, usefulness or other assurances as to the content appearing in this column. The Star disclaims all responsibility for any losses, damage to property or personal injury suffered directly or indirectly from reliance on such information.*