



Too Much Information?

Remember back in the day when there were just three things you looked for on a food package: the brand name, a description of the contents and possibly (if you were actually cooking) the instructions? OK, that may have also been around the time most products came with enough packaging to start their own landfill, but it's also true that in the past two decades, food labels, packages and wrappers have exploded with an overabundance of information. Many consumers now look for information on health, dietary or functional claims, country of origin, certification symbols by various groups, allergen information, and the list goes on. Now, as standardized nutrition labelling becomes mandatory this month (and in 2007 for smaller manufacturers), consumers will have an additional tool in their shopping arsenal.

The concept of nutrition labelling is a sound one – give consumers as much information as possible so that they can make informed food choices. It's also about safety, making sure consumers with health-related dietary restrictions or requirements know that the food products they choose are not potentially harmful to their health. By all indications the food industry is responding in a responsible, timely manner to the labelling issue. Because the new labelling requirements will also list trans fat content – currently a consumer and political hot button – it's also an appropriate time for many manufacturers to reformulate their products to reduce or eliminate trans fats (*see page 52*) or develop healthier choices.

But with the current concern over trans fat and other “bad-for-you” ingredients and foods – including the fear that our society's high-fat diets and sedentary lifestyles are leading to obesity in children – many manufacturers may be wondering what's next. All indications are that consumers and government are not going to retreat from the information issue any time soon. Could there come a time when food products are packaged with explicit warnings such as “Long-term use may result in obesity,” or “Consuming this product may increase your chances of having a heart attack”? It might sound a bit far-fetched, but consider that just over a decade ago cigarette packages were identifiable by their respective

colours and logos, and not by the increasingly horrific health warnings that now adorn cigarettes sold in Canada.

Elsewhere in the world, these types of health warnings may already be making their way onto food products. Next year France will become the first country to require health messages to accompany television and radio ads for processed foods. Instead of simply providing a warning, the messages will promote balanced, healthy eating and offer nutritional advice. And in California this August, attorney general Bill Lockyer filed suit against two fast-food chains and seven food manufacturers in an attempt to force them to include health warnings on their potato chip and french fry products, in this case due to the presence of the carcinogen acrylamide.

The question is, does it all become too much on-the-label information? And how much responsibility is the food industry expected to take for the nutritional choices of Canadians? Many manufacturers producing low-fat, low-sugar, better-for-you foods already combine their marketing efforts with solid research on healthier eating. Health Canada has also been proactive in attempting to educate Canadians on the basics of healthy eating, as well as on how to read and use

nutrition labelling. The Canadian Diabetes Association and the Dietitians of Canada's Healthy Eating is in Store for You (HESY) program similarly aims to teach consumers about making informed food choices through better understanding of nutrition labelling. In its 2004 HESY Evaluation Final Report and 2005 follow-up report, both groups noted that of 1,700 Canadians involved in the educational study between 2001 and 2004, 81 per cent believed reading labelling was important before purchasing food products. Sixty-eight per cent said this information always or often influenced their purchasing decision.

It's clear then that consumers are prepared to take their health in their own hands, as they should. Let's just take comfort in the fact that our industry is doing all it can to produce safer, healthier, better-quality products. And in the end, if consumers choose to ignore the labelling information, it's still their choice.

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