

Survey on Public Knowledge, Attitude and Practice regarding Nutrition Labelling 2012

- Summary -

Prepared for



By Consumer Search Hong Kong Ltd.



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ISO 9001:2008



ISO Cert No.: HKG0031007

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1. Introduction

1. With the legislative enactment of The Food and Drugs (Composition and Labelling) (Amendment: Requirements for Nutrition Labelling and Nutrition Claim) Regulation 2008 on 28 May 2008, the Centre for Food Safety of Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) launched a three-year Publicity and Education Campaign on Nutrition Labelling (or the Campaign). A survey on public knowledge, attitude and practice regarding nutrition labelling had been conducted in June to July 2008 (2008 Survey) to collect baseline information. At the end of the three year Campaign, another similar survey (2012 Survey) was conducted for comparison and to evaluate the effectiveness of the Campaign.
2. The Survey was conducted between 5 May and 5 June 2012. Out of 1 427 valid households visited (within 1 666 sampled living quarters from 18 District Council districts), a total of 1 009 respondents aged between 18 and 64 were successfully enumerated. An overall response rate of 70.7% was achieved.

2. Summary of Findings

Knowledge on Nutrients and Nutrition Labels

3. The knowledge level on nutrients and nutrition labels had increased slightly among the general public over the years. The percentages of people who could correctly answer at least three questions (out of five) about such areas were about the same in the two surveys (2008 Survey, 45.7%; 2012 Survey, 44.1%), but there were relatively more people who were knowledgeable on four to five related areas in the 2012 Survey (2008 Survey, 16.4%; 2012 Survey, 20.5%) compared to 2008.
 - 3.1 That there were nearly half of the target population in the 2012 Survey who showed some understanding of nutrients and nutrition labelling indicates that the general public's knowledge level on different areas had yet to be enhanced.
 - 3.2 The main issue on the aspect of nutrients was that people were more able to associate health problems with single nutrient but not multiple nutrients (e.g. both "saturated fat" and "trans fat" increases the "bad" cholesterol level). The findings also pointed out that the general public were more able to locate items on nutrition labels directly but were less able to derive further information from the nutrition labels.

Opinions on Nutrition Labelling and Attitudes towards Nutrition Labels

4. The proportions of the population who agreed that nutrition labelling and nutrition labels were beneficial and important to them were largely similar in the two surveys.

4.1 The 2012 Survey reveals that the general public maintained their very positive attitude towards nutrition labelling. Over eight in ten persons aged 18-64 opined that nutrition labelling was able to:

- promote public health (88.4%);
- encourage the food trade to produce or develop healthy food products (86.3%); and
- promote a balanced diet (85.3%) among the population.

4.2 Public attitude towards nutrition labels also remained positive. The great majority (over or nearly eighty percent) of the population in the 2012 Survey agreed that:

- it was important to read the information on nutrition labels before buying prepackaged food (86.7%);
- the information on nutrition labels could help them make healthy food choices (86.5%); and
- the information included in the nutrition labels was helpful for deciding what food to buy (78.7%).

However, a considerably lower percentage of the general public thought that the nutrition claims of prepackaged food were truthful, with 51.7% of the 18-64 year olds believing in such claims. The proportion, nevertheless showed an improvement of six points compared to four years ago (45.4%).

Practice on the Use of Nutrition Labelling

5. Seven in ten persons aged 18-64 (69.7%) stated that they frequently (i.e. every time/ always/ most times/ sometimes) read the nutrition label on the package when they bought a food product for the first time.

5.1 People with the following demographic characteristics had relatively higher proportions of frequently reading the nutrition label on the package of food product bought for the first time:

- Females (75.4%);
- Aged 30-39 (78.4%) and 40-49 (75.7%);
- Those who had attained matriculation or tertiary education (79.9%);
- Managers/ administrators/ professionals/ associate professionals (79.1%) and clerks/ service workers/ shop sales workers (78.9%);
- Those having a monthly household income of \$30,000 or above (78.3%); and
- Frequent purchasers of prepackaged food (75.0%).

- 5.2 The following subgroups, nevertheless, had relatively higher proportions of those who infrequently read (i.e. not often/ never) the nutrition label on the package of food product bought for the first time:
- Males (35.3%);
 - Aged 18-29 (35.6%) and 50-64 (34.9%);
 - Less educated, having attained incomplete secondary education or below (41.5%);
 - Non-working statuses other than homemakers (42.2%);
 - Those having a monthly household income less than \$10,000 (34.0%); and
 - Infrequent buyers of prepackaged food (46.3%).
6. There were about the same percentage of people who frequently read eight or more items on the nutrition labels in the two surveys (2008 Survey, 32.6%; 2012 Survey, 36.3%). The general public showed consistent purchase behaviour towards low fat food over time. Compared with the results of the 2008 Survey, no significant change in the proportion of people who frequently chose low fat food when buying prepackaged food was witnessed (2008 Survey, 76.2%; 2012 Survey, 73.8%).
7. However, the general public seemed to be making less use of nutrition labels compared to four years ago when they purchased prepackaged food:
- 7.1 The percentage of people who frequently referred to the label of prepackaged food purchased for the first time dropped from 76.2% to 69.7%; and
- 7.2 The information on some of the items listed on nutrition labels, notably “sugar” (2008 Survey, 72.6%; 2012 Survey, 65.7%), “total fat” (2008 Survey, 69.9%; 2012 Survey, 63.5%), and “carbohydrate” (2008 Survey, 58.2%; 2012 Survey, 52.5%), received attention from relatively fewer people in 2012.

Positive Relationship among Purchase of Prepackaged Food, Usage and Knowledge of Nutrients and Nutrition Labelling

8. The survey findings reveal that there was a positive relationship among purchasers of prepackaged food, users of nutrition labelling and those who were knowledgeable about nutrients and nutrition labelling. Frequent buyers of prepackaged food were more prone to be frequent readers of the nutrition labels on products bought for the first time and were also more likely to have better knowledge on nutrients and nutrition labels:
- 8.1 75.0% of the frequent purchasers of prepackaged food were also frequent readers of nutrition label, which was higher than that over the general public (69.7%); and
- 8.2 46.9% of the frequent purchasers of prepackaged food and 50.0% of the frequent readers of nutrition label correctly answered 3-5 questions out of 5 in knowledge assessment, which were higher than that over the general public (44.1%).

Demographic Characteristics

9. As the majority of frequent purchasers of prepackaged food were frequent readers of nutrition labels on products purchased for the first time, these two groups of people shared very similar demographic characteristics. (refer to paragraph 5.1 above)

10. Specifically, the females aged 30-49 who had attained matriculation or tertiary education was the demographic sub-segment with higher percentage of frequent buyers of prepackaged food and frequent readers of the nutrition labels on products bought for the first time. Among them, significant increases in proportions of frequently reading of eight or more items on nutrition labels (2008 Survey, 38.2%; 2012 Survey, 54.6%), frequent purchasers of prepackaged food (2008 Survey, 78.2%; 2012 Survey, 92.2%) and low fat food (2008 Survey, 79.1%; 2012 Survey, 92.9%), were observed in the 2012 Survey. This group of people also paid particular attention to the items of “total fat”, “saturated fat” and “trans fat” on the nutrition labels.
 - 10.1 It is likely that they were the shopping decision makers for prepackaged products and hence more sensitive to the information relating to food products.
11. Comparing with the 2008 Survey, people’s knowledge about nutrients and nutrition labels had denoted increase in view of more people who had correct knowledge on at least four out of five areas, especially among those age 50-64 and with secondary or below education.
12. Although general increase in proportion of frequent purchasers of prepackaged food was observed in those with secondary or below education, there was a general decrease in proportion of frequent readers of nutrition labels on products purchased for the first time, especially for those aged 50-64.

Publicity Channels

13. The Survey asked the respondents to quote at most five channels of obtaining information on nutrition labelling. Same as four years ago, the top three mentioned channels of obtaining information on nutrition labelling were television, newspapers and websites. Although the percentages of people who received such information from “television” (2008 Survey “total mentions”, 79.2%; 2012 Survey “total mentions”, 79.4%) and “newspapers” (2008 Survey “total mentions”, 72.0%; 2012 Survey “total mentions”, 68.1%) stayed at more or less the same level as 2008; the proportion of people who found such information via the Internet had risen considerably over time (2008 Survey “total mentions”, 28.4%; 2012 Survey “total mentions”, 41.3%).
14. Other than television, the user characteristics of the major information channels by demographic profiles are as below:
 - 14.1 Youngsters aged 18-29 – They were more likely to use websites as their sources of information.
 - 14.2 Individuals aged 30-64 with secondary or below education – the traditional mass media such as radio and newspapers could be effective means of reaching this group. Specifically, newspapers were also a more effective mean of reaching those males aged 30-49.
 - 14.3 Individuals aged 30-64 with matriculation and tertiary education – besides the higher usage of traditional media of newspapers, this better-educated group of individuals were more likely to use websites as their sources of information.
 - 14.4 Specific to those females aged 30-49, magazines and health education materials in leaflets / booklets might also be a viable option.

Nutrients Considered Most Relevant

15. The Survey asked the respondents to quote at most two nutrients they considered the most relevant. Among the different nutrients, protein (total mentions, 35.9%; first mention, 27.7%) and sugar (total mentions, 34.4%; first mention, 18.1%) were perceived by the highest proportions of people aged 18-64 to be of relevance to them, followed by sodium (total mentions, 28.6%; first mention, 10.2%) and carbohydrate (total mentions, 24.7%; first mention, 11.1%).
16. Although “total fat”, “trans fatty acids” and “saturated fatty acids” were each mentioned by less than one-fifth of people (19.9%, 16.2% and 8.2% respectively), fat as a whole (i.e. the three fat-related items combined) received 44.3% of mentions which was higher than each of the other nutrients.
17. Based on the key reasons why the general public opined that the various nutrients were of relevance to them, it was observed that while people in general related protein and carbohydrate to positive aspects such as developing muscles/ bones/ body, providing essential/ important nutrient to the body and improving the health, they tended to associate other mentioned nutrients with negative aspects and specific diseases, such as affecting the kidney function, causing obesity, and causing diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

3. Recommendations

Promotion Activities on Knowledge, Opinion and Attitude

18. Continuous promotion activities on nutrition labelling and education efforts on nutrition labels are recommended to further enhance the awareness of nutrition labelling in general and to remind the general public the importance and benefits of nutrition labelling. In particular, the messages to be communicated should address the following issues as reflected by the survey findings in paragraphs 6 and 7.
19. While there was some marginal growth on people’s knowledge level on nutrients and nutrition labels over time, the main areas of improvement remained to be:
 - The knowledge level on the nutrients that caused health problems, especially if multiple nutrients are involved;
 - The understanding of the terminology (e.g. serving size, number of servings per package) used in the nutrition label; and
 - The correct way of applying the nutrition information in the label.
20. To fill the knowledge gap, the promotional/ educational materials should continue to emphasize on the health effects of individual nutrients as well as multiple nutrients. The different types of fats should be especially well explained, in view that the awareness of these nutrients was relatively lower among the population and that fat as a whole was considered by the highest proportion of people to be of relevance to them. Meanwhile, the general public should be familiarized with the terminology used in nutrition label and should be illustrated with how the available information can be applied in real life situations, e.g. how to calculate serving size and intake of nutrients per consumption.

21. Another area that needed to be looked at was the general public's perception on the truthfulness of the information claims of prepackaged food. In 2012 Survey, marginally over half (51.7%) of the population believed those claimed were real, and proportion of people held a negative opinion on it dropped from 42.2% in 2008 Survey to 31.7%. Therefore, the messages communicated should be able to continually boost the general public's confidence in the truthfulness of the information contained in the nutrition labels.

Demographic Subgroups on Focus and Publicity Channels

22. The primary promotion and education efforts should be focused on the older age groups (50-64 year-olds) and less educated (secondary or below). General decreases in the proportion of frequent readers of nutrition labels on products purchased for the first time and various items on nutrition labels was observed in the Survey.
23. Other age groups with less education could be the secondary priority. The Survey results showed that they had a poorer knowledge and lower incidences in reading nutrition labels comparing with those better educated.
 - 23.1 The major focus of the promotions could be the importance to keep a good habit in concerning the nutrient intake from the food by referring to the nutrition labels.
24. Those with matriculation and tertiary education could be less prioritised. The major focus would be reminders which keeping their habits "refreshed".
25. As television, newspapers and websites were the chief information sources for most people on nutrition labelling, these platforms can be used as the major publicity channels for carrying out the promotion and educational activities. Specifically,
 - 25.1 Television can be used to promote general messages such as reminding the target audience the availability of nutrition label on prepackaged food and the nutrition information contained in the label. This medium is employed to achieve high reach and wide coverage of different demographic groups in the population;
 - 25.2 Newspapers can be used to provide more detailed explanation on the health effects of the various nutrients, the terminology used in the nutrition label and the application of the information contained in the label. The key target would be the older (aged 30 and above) population;
 - 25.3 The Internet can be used for both communicating general messages and elaborating nutrition labelling-related information, with the main target being those people aged under 30 and who had attained higher education level.
26. Besides the chief information sources, the following platforms can also be considered to supplement the main publicity channels:
 - 26.1 To those with secondary education or below, radio could also be a good medium to supplement TV in delivering general messages, especially for specific occupation such as drivers;
 - 26.2 To reach those females aged 30-49, magazines and health education materials in leaflets / booklets might also be considered.