Food Labeling Under Scrutiny

By Susan Nitzke

According to the 2005-6 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), about 44% of adults review health claims at least sometimes when they are deciding their food product purchases. Although food labels have valuable information, symbols and claims on food packages are proliferating in a seemingly willy-nilly manner, making it increasingly difficult to decipher the actual properties of various products on the market. According to one FDA official, products with poorly documented label claims are “symptomatic of a broad trend in the food industry – using nutrition-related claims to market products even when the scientific substantiation that consumers will actually benefit is weak or non-existent.” For example, Cocoa Krispies packages carried a prominent banner last year stating that the product “helps support your child’s immunity.”

To address these issues, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) has completed phase 1 of a study of front-of-package labeling, especially nutrition rating systems and symbols. The second phase will focus on assessing how consumers use the various symbols and ratings. The phase two report is expected to be released sometime in 2011. At that time, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) will have the information needed to institute reforms of the way information is displayed on food packages.

Implications for Extension Educators. The 2010 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee report recommends that Americans need access to improved, easy-to-understand labels listing calorie content and portion size on packaged foods. When both phases of the IOM study are complete, the FDA will have the information it needs to institute new labeling rules. Until labeling rules are streamlined, education is needed to help consumers find and use the most reliable and consistent information available, i.e., the Nutrition Facts label and the ingredients list on the back or the side of the package. One resource for this purpose is the “Food Label Cards” in the FLP resource database.

References.


4 https://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/apps/flrc/tch_res2/resourceDetails.cfm?rid=5864