

Report: Foods Should Have Energy Star-Like Ratings

WASHINGTON (AP) — Just as that Energy Star tag helps you choose your appliances, a new report says a rating symbol on the front of every soup can, cereal box and yogurt container could help hurried shoppers go home with the healthiest foods.

Thursday's report urges the Food and Drug Administration to adopt new food labeling to clear the confusing clutter off today's packages and give consumers a fast way to compare choices.

It wouldn't replace the in-depth Nutrition Facts panel that's now on the back or side of food packages. But few shoppers stop to read or heed that fine print in the middle of the grocery aisle.

The Institute of Medicine says it's time to put right upfront the most important information for health: how many calories per serving — and just how big that serving is — along with stars or some other symbol to show at a glance how the food rates for certain fats, sodium and added sugars.

"American shoppers are busy shoppers," said Ellen Wartella, a psychology professor at Northwestern University. Wartella chaired the IOM committee that studied the issue at the request of federal health officials.

"We want a really simple system that says if you have three marks, that product is healthier than one with two marks."

How to get Americans to eat more wisely is a huge problem as obesity and diet-related diseases are skyrocketing. The FDA already was working to change the food-labeling system to make it more user-friendly, and has promised to crack down on inaccurate labeling that has confused consumers.

But ranking a food's healthfulness, rather than just providing consumers information to try to judge that for themselves, would mark a major shift in government food policy. The agency didn't say if it was interested in that kind of ratings approach, or how soon it would make labeling changes but called Thursday's report a thoughtful analysis that would help it decide next steps.

"FDA agrees consumers can benefit from a front-of-pack labeling system that conveys nutrition information in a manner that is simple and consistent with the Nutrition Facts panel," said spokeswoman Siobhan DeLancey.

The Institute of Medicine recommendation would face an uphill battle with food

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manufacturers who are pushing their own version of on-the-front food labels but don't like the idea of ranking one food as healthier than a competitor's.

"We believe the most effective programs are those that trust consumers and not ones that tell consumers what they should and should not eat," said Scott Faber, a lobbyist for the Grocery Manufacturers Association.

Changing dietary behavior is very difficult, and how much of a role nutritional disclosure plays isn't clear. Some studies show that food-label readers do eat much more healthfully, the IOM found.

Moreover, sales did change a bit when the Hannaford grocery chain introduced its own storewide food-rating system in 2006, said Lori Kaley, a registered dietitian at the University of Southern Maine and a scientific adviser to the Guiding Stars Licensing Company that markets the ratings system to additional stores today. Sales of high-fat whole milk dropped as some shoppers switched to three-star skim milk or two-star 1 percent milk, for example, and some manufacturers reformulated their store brands to be rated more favorably, she said.

But other studies have found little effect from food labeling, questioning how many people read the labels. Certainly waistlines still are growing despite a proliferation of nutrition information on food packages and, more recently, calorie counts on restaurant menus.

The IOM panel said part of the problem may be consumer confusion. Highlighting "good source of fiber" or "low-fat" or "high in calcium" on the front of a package doesn't override bad news lurking in the FDA-mandated nutrition label on the back. A food with reduced fat might have made up for the change in taste with a lot of extra sugar. Or a breakfast bar with lots of fiber might also contain too much heart-harming trans fat.

"If they have a health claim, consumers view that product overall as a healthy product," said Tracy Fox, a Washington, D.C., nutrition consultant and member of the IOM committee. "At least half of them that have a nutrient content claim are higher in one of those (other ingredients) we think consumers should reduce."

Under the IOM's proposed system, foods would earn up to three points for meeting certain nutritional standards — one each for keeping sodium, added sugars or a bad-fat duo, saturated fat and trans fat, below designated levels.

On the cereal aisle, plain oatmeal might get three points while the flavored kind would get just two because of added sugar, for example.

"If I always buy Triscuits, I'm going to buy them again. But if there is a decision that needs to be made, we hope this will help consumers make better decisions," said the IOM committee's Fox.

Some foods are so unhealthy as to be unrated altogether — a sugary soft drink wouldn't get a point for its lack of fat. Whatever the rating, the IOM proposal says all

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foods also would need a clear front-of-package calorie count: 150 calories for 16 potato chips, for example.

For now, the Grocery Manufacturers Association says the industry has begun rolling out voluntary labels called "Facts Up Front," which will list calories and the amount of saturated fat, sodium and sugars per serving — levels, not ratings.

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