Global Health Matters

This article by Lv et al. provides an example of the worldwide movement to improve nutrition information and nutrition labeling. People all over the globe are beginning to request label information on the nutrition of the food they are eating as the level of concern regarding chronic noncommunicable diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and hypertension increases. The authors point out that providing nutrition information on labels is at present a voluntary initiative in China that began with new regulations launched in early 2008. As China becomes a greater influence on the global market, both as a supplier and a consumer of food products, it is critical that the Chinese population has the same information to which developed countries around the world have access. While the effort is highly laudable, the challenge is that this regulation is still voluntary and the regulators must increase their efforts for compliance beyond what is presently being done. In this study, only one-quarter of the food products assessed contained nutrition labeling.

The authors suggest that nutrition information without nutrition education is not enough to protect public health. To make thoughtful and healthful decisions, people need to understand what the information means and how to take this new information and apply it to improving their health and lifestyle. The growing global problem of obesity requires basic information so that individuals can make better choices, as well as educational programs to inform individuals on how to make better decisions. In some cases, even with information, there is still a lack of healthy choices needed to make healthful lifestyle changes.

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A SURVEY OF NUTRITION LABELS AND FATS, SUGARS, AND SODIUM INGREDIENTS IN COMMERCIAL PACKAGED FOODS IN HANGZHOU, CHINA

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To reduce the risk of chronic diseases that stem from unhealthy diets, the World Health Organization (WHO) made recommendations in its publication, *Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity, and Health*. For diet, recommendations for populations and individuals included (1) limiting energy intake from total fats and shifting fat consumption away from saturated fats to unsaturated fats, (2) eliminating trans fats, (3) limiting the intake of free sugars, and (4) limiting salt (sodium) consumption from all sources.¹

The question is, how can we achieve these diet goals?

Individuals' daily intake of fats, sugars, and salt comes not only from home cooking, but also when eating outside the home in restaurants, workplaces, and marketplaces. In response to consumers' rapidly changing needs, food industries are developing an increasing variety of processed foods. Many food manufacturers increase flavor by simply adding fats, sugars, and salt to foods. In addition, hydrogenated vegetable oils are used not only to give foods a desirable taste and texture, but also to improve food shelf life.

Unfortunately, most consumers are either unaware of the increased health risks associated with some processed foods or lack the skills to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy foods. For consumers to be able to make healthy food choices, WHO recommends that governments ensure accurate, standardized, and comprehensible information is provided on the content of food items. Furthermore, WHO recommends that governments take measures to promote the development, production, and marketing of food products that contribute to a healthy diet and encourage reduced salt content, use of hydrogenated oils, and sugar content in processed foods.¹

The regulatory environment in China has been characterized by voluntary nutrition labeling. Mandatory labeling is only required on foods with special dietary