

DOES A DISCLOSURE STATEMENT AID UNDERSTANDING OF NUTRIENT COMPOSITION?

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Introduction

The proposed **Nutrition, Health and Related Claims** standard sets out a new framework for the regulation of such claims. FSANZ considered it important to conduct a study to provide baseline data on consumer views of claims and to investigate specific aspects of the proposed approach for regulating claims to support the development of the standard. One component of this study is presented here.

Objectives

To investigate the use and effectiveness of a disclosure statement in assisting consumers to evaluate the fat content and 'healthiness' of muesli bars.

Methodology

- online survey including 1044 respondents in Australia (n=635) and New Zealand (n=409); half this sample (n=526) was randomly selected to answer questions relating to the disclosure statement
- respondents were main or joint main household shoppers
- respondents shown pictures of three muesli bars each with a nutrient content claim ('source of dietary fibre') and the nutrition information panel (NIP), and either:
 - no additional information to that which is prescribed in the Food Standards Code (control);
 - a disclosure statement – 'see nutrition information for fat content' on the front of the pack (DS); or
 - a disclosure statement - 'see nutrition information for fat content' on the front of the pack and a reference guide to fat content below the NIP on the back of the pack (DS + guide). (see picture)
- control product always shown first while the other two products were rotated



Results

Use of disclosure statement

- 85% respondents (who saw the DS or DS + guide) stated they would look for more information on the package about fat if they saw the statement 'see nutrition information for fat' on the front of the package

Implication of disclosure statements

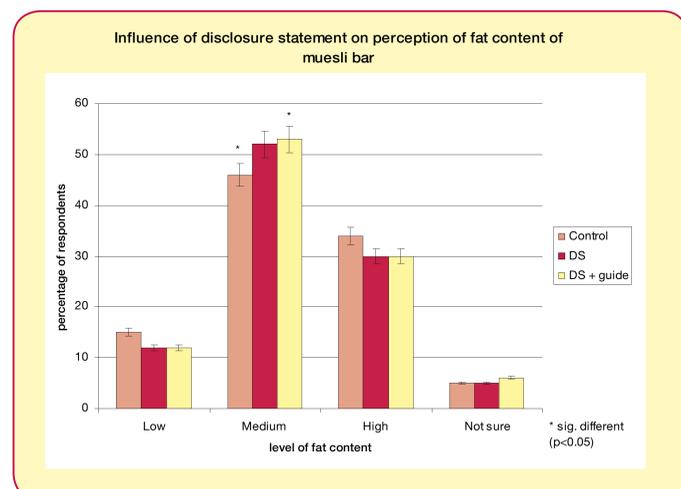
- some respondents were unclear about the interpretation of the disclosure statement (see table).
- 66% respondents did not understand the intent of the disclosure statement (which was to encourage respondents look for information on fat content in the NIP)

Interpretation of Disclosure Statement	Percentage of respondents *
Think that the manufacturer is trying to highlight fat favourably	34
Think that I am supposed to look for information on fat elsewhere on the package	34
Think that the manufacturer is legally required to put it there	33
Think that the food must be high in fat	20
Think that the food must be low in fat	17
Don't know what it means	3
Think something else	4

* respondents could choose more than one response

Perception of fat content

- significantly more respondents indicated that the product with DS + guide had a 'medium' fat content (correct answer) compared with control product (no difference between DS and DS + guide) (see graph)
- nearly half of all respondents who saw the DS (or DS + guide) did not make a correct assessment of the fat content
- presence of the fat guide did not offer any additional benefit compared with DS alone



Confidence in perception of fat content

- 44%, 40% and 36% respondents claimed to be extremely confident/very confident in their perception of fat content of products with DS + guide, DS and control respectively

- approximately 50% respondents claimed to be somewhat confident in their perception of fat content for all three products

Perceived healthiness

- approx. 60% respondents considered muesli bar to be healthy/very healthy for all three products
- respondents may generally perceive muesli bars to be healthy irrespective of label information

Use of available information

- 83%, 85% and 79% respondents stated they used the NIP to assess fat content for products with DS + guide, DS and control respectively (significant difference between DS and control)
- 29% respondents who viewed the product with DS + guide stated they used the fat guide

Study Limitations

- only included one product type and one claim
- respondents may have made an assessment of the nutritional value of the product when viewing the control product and did not alter their opinion when subsequently looking at products with the DS, because the NIP values did not change

Conclusions

- many respondents were unclear about the intent of the DS
- DS only slightly improved the respondents' assessment of the fat content
- DS + guide did improve respondents' confidence in assessing the fat content but less than half of the respondents felt 'extremely confident/very confident'
- DS did not alter the perception of the healthiness of the muesli bar
- DS did direct more consumers to the NIP but only half of respondents made the correct assessment of the fat content of the food indicating that consumer education is required on interpretation of the NIP

Outcome

FSANZ considered that this research indicated mandating the use of the disclosure statement 'see nutrition information for fat content' would not be effective in assisting consumers to evaluate the fat content and/or healthiness of food products.

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Reference

FSANZ 2005. *Food Labelling Issues: Quantitative research on consumers' perceptions and use of nutrition, health and related claims on packaged foods*. Evaluation Report Series No. 13. Report prepared by TNS Social Research. Available at www.foodstandards.gov.au