



The New Food Label

Grocery store aisles are on their way to becoming avenues to greater nutritional knowledge.

The new food label will make it possible. Under new regulations from the Food and Drug Administration of the Department of Health and Human Services and the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the food label will soon offer more complete, useful and accurate nutrition information than ever before.

The purpose of food label reform is simple: to clear up confusion that has prevailed on supermarket shelves for years, to help consumers choose more healthful diets, and to offer an incentive to food companies to improve the nutritional qualities of their products.

Among key changes taking place are:

- nutrition labeling for almost all foods. Consumers now will be able to learn about the nutritional qualities of almost all of the products they buy.
- information on the amount per serving of saturated fat, cholesterol, dietary fiber, and other nutrients that are of major health concern to today's consumers
- nutrient reference values, expressed as Percent of Daily Values, that can help consumers see how a food fits into an overall daily diet
- uniform definitions for terms that describe a food's nutrient content—such as "light," "low-fat," and "high-fiber"—to ensure that such terms mean the same for any product on which they appear. These descriptors will be particularly helpful for consumers trying to moderate their intake of calories or fat and other nutrients, or for those trying to increase their intake of certain nutrients, such as fiber.
- claims about the relationship between a nutrient and a disease, such as calcium and osteoporosis, and fat and cancer. These will be helpful for people who are concerned about eating foods that may help keep them healthier longer.
- standardized serving sizes that make nutritional comparisons of similar products easier
- declaration of total percentage of juice in juice drinks. This will enable consumers to know exactly how much juice is in a product.
- voluntary nutrition information for many raw foods.

NLEA

These and other changes are part of final rules to be published soon in the *Federal Register*. FDA's rules meet the provisions of the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act of 1990 (NLEA), which, among other things, requires nutrition labeling for most foods (except meat and poultry) and authorizes the use of nutrient content claims and appropriate FDA-approved health claims.

Meat and poultry products regulated by USDA are not

covered by NLEA. However, USDA's regulations closely parallel FDA's new rules, summarized here.

Effective Dates

The new label may start to appear on products soon, although manufacturers have until May 1994 to comply with most of the new labeling requirements. Regulations pertaining to health claims and some parts of the ingredient labeling rule become effective in May 1993.

As provided by Congress under NLEA, FDA extended the implementation date for mandatory nutrition labeling and nutrient content descriptors by one year from the law's target date of May 1993 because of "undue economic hardship" that the earlier effective date would have caused.

Nutrition Labeling—Applicable Foods

The new regulations will require nutrition labeling on most foods. In addition, nutrition information currently is voluntary for many raw foods: the 20 most frequently eaten fresh fruits and vegetables and raw fish, under FDA's voluntary point-of-purchase nutrition information program. In fact, point-of-purchase information for raw produce and raw fish has been available in some grocery stores since November 1991.

Although voluntary, the programs for raw produce and raw meat, fish and poultry carry strong incentives for retailers to participate. The NLEA states that if voluntary compliance is insufficient, nutrition information for such raw foods will become mandatory.

Nutrition Labeling—Exemptions

Under NLEA, some foods are exempt from nutrition labeling. These include:

- food produced by small businesses (that is, those with food sales of less than \$50,000 a year or total sales of less than \$500,000)
- restaurant food
- food served for immediate consumption, such as that served in hospital cafeterias and airplanes
- ready-to-eat food prepared primarily on site; for example, bakery, deli, and candy store items
- food sold by food service vendors, such as small cookie counters, sidewalk vendors, and vending machines
- food shipped in bulk, as long as it is not for sale in that form to consumers
- medical foods, such as those used to address the nutritional needs of patients with certain diseases
- plain coffee and tea, some spices, and other foods that contain no significant amounts of any nutrients

Although these foods are exempt, they are free to carry nu-