

Codex guidelines on nutrition labeling and health claims

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Consumers gather information about the foods they buy from various sources including family members and friends as well as advertisements in a variety of media. Information about the characteristics of a food can also be found on food labels. From a public health point of view, food labels can be a useful source of nutrition information. Information about the nutritional characteristics of a food can assist consumers in making better food choices. It also encourages the use of nutrition principles when making food choices and in preparing meals. Indeed, nutrition information on food labels can be one of the strategies adopted to assist consumers in adopting healthy dietary practices. There are two main types of information on food labels, namely nutrition labeling or nutrient declaration and nutrition and health claims.

Nutrition information on food labels is also beneficial to food manufacturers. Such information enable manufacturers to highlight nutritional quality of their products. Consumers can also be informed of the functions or health benefits of certain nutrients or “functional” components in food.

Food regulatory agencies welcome efforts of food companies to disseminate such nutrition information to consumers. However, they have to ensure that such information is factual and appropriately presented. There has been increased interest and efforts of authorities to improve regulatory control of nutrition labeling and nutrition and health claims. More countries are looking towards Codex Alimentarius international standards for guidance in establishing national regulations. These standards are established through the Joint FAO/WHO Food Standards Programme, aimed at protecting health of the consumers and ensuring fair trade practices in the food trade.

Two Codex standards are of relevance, namely Guidelines on Nutrition Labelling and Guidelines on Nutrition and Health Claims. Details of requirements, conditions and format for nutrition labeling are provided in the first Guidelines. Nutrition labeling is a description intended to inform the consumer of nutritional properties of a food. It is often taken to mean Nutrient Declaration, which is a standardised statement or listing of the nutrient content of a food. It is often known as Nutrition Information Panel (NIP) on a food label.

The definitions of the types of claims allowed and the conditions for making these claims are outlined in the second Codex Guidelines. Nutrition claim means any representation which states, suggests or implies that a food has particular nutritional properties. Nutrition claims include nutrient content claim (eg high in vitamin C; free of cholesterol) and comparative claim (eg more protein). Health claims means any representation that states, suggests or implies that a relationship exists between a food or a constituent of that food. Three types of health claims are permitted, namely nutrient function claims, other function claims and reduction of disease risk claims. The nutrient function claims describe the physiological role of macronutrients, vitamins and minerals in growth, development and normal functions of the body. Other function claims describe specific beneficial effects of the consumption of a bioactive component in food in improving or modifying a physiological function. Disease risk reduction claims relate the consumption of a food or food bioactive component to the reduced risk of developing a disease or health related condition.

A review of the situation in five South East Asian countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) as well as China and Japan showed that there has been increased interest in activities in nutrition labeling and health claims. Malaysia enforced mandatory nutrition labeling for wide variety of foods in 2005, covering more than 50 categories of commonly consumed foods, contributing significantly to dietary intake. In other Asian countries, mandatory nutrition labeling is only applicable to: foods for special dietary uses (eg infant formula, cereal-based foods for children); foods making nutrition claims; fortified or enriched foods. Nevertheless, many products in the market do have voluntary nutrition labeling with format guidelines provided by the respective regulatory agency. These format and requirements for NIP differ widely for countries in the region.

Nutrition claims are permitted in all the countries reviewed. All countries allow nutrient function claims. Other function claims are permitted in all countries, except in China and Thailand. The claims relate to several bioactive components including several dietary fibres and non-digestible oligosaccharides, and plant sterols. Disease risk reduction claims are considered higher level claims and are permitted only in a few countries, namely Indonesia, Philippines and Japan, and only for a few nutrients or bioactive compounds. There are considerable differences in the permitted nutrition and health claims in countries in the region and may not necessarily follow the Codex guidelines. There are also differences in the regulatory framework for the approval of health claims. Nevertheless, all regulatory authorities require proper scientific substantiation of health claims. There will certainly be increased interest and activities in the region amongst consumers, food industry and regulatory agencies.

There are various challenges in implementing these regulations. An important area is various issues related to consumer understanding and utilization of nutrition information on food labels. One area relevant to this conference is good food composition data and laboratory capability. For truthful nutrition labeling, food manufacturers have to ensure that there is accurate data on the composition of the nutrients contained in the food. Similarly, for nutrition and health claims, accurate data on the amounts of the nutrients or food components are needed. For scientific substantiation of the claimed health effects, accurate quantitation of the amounts of these nutrients or components is essential. For regulatory agencies, well-equipped laboratories and well-trained personnel are required for surveillance and enforcement purposes.

Codex work in the area of nutrition labeling and claims are also continuing. Recognising the heavy and growing burden of non-communicable diseases in almost all countries, WHO has developed a Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health. An Action Plan on how Codex can assist in the implementation of the Global Strategy has been actively deliberated within the Codex Committees on Food Labeling and Nutrition and Foods for Special Dietary Uses. Member countries agreed to work further on several topics, including revision of the Guidelines on Nutrition Labeling.