

Food labels – the hidden truth

Can you trust nutrition and health claims?

Consumers' Association's honest labelling campaign aims to ensure that food labels are clear, comprehensive, accurate and enable consumers to make informed decisions about what they eat.

The latest phase of the campaign focuses on nutrition and health claims. As more and more of us look for healthy eating options, we ask whether the claims made on food labels always mean what we think. The examples we've found show how consumers continue to be let down by food legislation and by food manufacturers.

Changes to European food law are needed to improve this situation. However, manufacturers must be more honest if consumers are to really know what they are eating.

High 'lights'

Many products claim to be 'light', but there is no official definition of what this means and it is not even covered by voluntary guidelines. The existing guidelines stipulate that 'low fat', for example, should mean less than 3g per 100g. However, we found 'light' products with a range of fat contents:

Benecol light contained 14g fat per 100g; **Dairylea light** contained 10.5 g fat per 100g; **Kraft light** contained 11g per 100g; **Primula light** had 9g per 100g. Meanwhile, **Philadelphia light** contained 16g per 100g, and even the 'extra light' version contained 5g per 100g, still more than you would expect for a 'low fat' product.



Confused by % fat free claims?

What does it mean when a product is 90 per cent fat free? We have repeatedly raised concerns about the use of '% fat free' claims: *Which?* research has shown how confusing they can be – people assume they are lower in fat than is really the case. While many manufacturers and retailers are changing their labels as a result of voluntary guidelines which discourage their use, we still found some examples:



Soreen Snack claims that it is '90% fat free', suggesting that it is a healthier option, but it actually contains 10% fat, which is a significant amount. And we still found this ham in **Marks & Spencer** claiming to be '95% fat free'.

Health claims – good for the soul?

We found all manner of product claims ranging from a sex fruit and seed bar implying that it will improve your sex life to a drink that offers to 'refresh your soul'. Manufacturers add a whole range of ingredients to foods in order to make them 'healthy'. While some products make explicit claims, others are vague and it's not uncommon to find products that contain an extensive range of ingredients that enable manufacturers to make complex and trendy-sounding claims about the effects of the product. Some of the more interesting ones are shown on the following pages.

Blinded by science?

The **Food Doctor** range of cereal bars include the:

'**Get it on**' sex fruit and seed bar which states that 'the nutrients in this bar may balance hormones and with added ginkgo biloba support the flow of blood to the extremities. The rest is up to you';

'**Get Set**' energy fruit and seed bar which is 'designed for people on the move'. 'It contains a balanced mix of nutrients with added spirulina, which can help enhance energy production as well as provide essential micronutrients';

'**Cleanse**' detox fruit and seed bar. It says that 'the ingredients in this bar have been selected to help cleanse your system. It contains a balanced mix of nutrients with added milk thistle that help you detoxify'.

Kombucha drink which contains a type of bacteria claims to 'cleanse and refresh your body, your soul'. It goes on to claim that it supports the body's natural defences, may make a valuable contribution to maintaining a balanced intestinal flora, and has 'harmonising effects on both metabolism and intestinal activity'.

Organic Gusto energy drink with guarana and ginseng says that the guarana is 'a natural source of caffeine that gives steady stimulation for stamina. Ginseng invigorates and is also reputed to enhance your love life'.

In some cases, the claims aren't made on the food itself, but in related advertising. **Cadbury's 'Boost'** chocolate bar for example now comes in a variety with 'glucose and guarana'. Posters to promote the product claim that guarana is 'the Amazon's natural mind stimulant. Not eaten by all inhabitants' next to a crocodile handbag, and the statement 'One step ahead'. '**Bowel Benefit**' bar promotes the 'www.healthybowels.com' website.

The **Feel Good Drinks Co** produces a range of drinks that are 'naturally relaxing' (orange and mango juice drink with lemon balm, camomile, green tea and vitamin C), 'naturally energizing' (lemon juice drink with ginseng, guarana, ginkgo and vitamin C), and 'naturally cleansing' (cranberry and orange juice drink with aloe vera, jasmine and vitamins A, C and E)

Even tea now seems to have properties we didn't know about. **Tetley** promotes its tea on the basis that it is 'naturally rich in antioxidants' and the use of heart logos, including the slogan 'Tetley ♥ U'. **PG Tips** also take a similar approach claiming that there are plenty of antioxidants in tea and so 'with PG Tips you've not only got a tasty tea, but a healthier diet brewing'. **Heinz** promotes a number of its products through its 'Five a day the healthy way' campaign. It claims that half a 400g tin of **Heinz Spaghetti with Sausages in tomato sauce** will count as one portion of fruit and vegetables.

ACE new energizer **Lipovitan** makes a range of claims: 'For a natural lift and well being. Vitamins A, C and E work together to help reduce the harmful effects of free radicals. Vitamins B1, B2 and B6 aid the release of energy into your body and sharpen your edge. Perfect for women and men with hectic lifestyles'.



What's in a name?

Some product labels aren't explicit, but make very general claims that are often encapsulated in the name of the product or range. **Roundtrees fruitsome** bars, for example, carry the slogan 'Good food, good life', despite being high in sugar.

Asda now has a range of products carrying the slogan 'Good for you', yet some products in this range are just healthier versions of standard products. For example, the 'Good for you' houmous still contains 18g per 100g fat. **Feelfine – a drink for tomorrow** (passionfruit flavour), tells you that 'it' has been specially formulated to make you feel fine the morning after' and is also apparently 'the perfect recovery drink following a strenuous workout'.

While it is illegal to say that a food can help prevent, treat or cure osteoporosis, you can buy **Osteocare** (a complete formula to help maintain strong bones for men and women of all ages) and 'Backosamine' ('helping to maintain mobility of the joints'), while products like **Wellwoman** ('advanced formula to help maintain all-round health and wellbeing') and **Wellman** ('to help maintain health, vitality, energy release') food supplements make more general claims.



What's behind a logo?

We also found products that use logos to make claims. **Kellogg's** for example now use a series of logos on their breakfast cereals. They state that 'while you'll know that all Kellogg's cereals are nutritious – and tasty of course – they all have something different to offer and it's sometimes difficult to decide which cereals have the

benefits you want. That's why **Kellogg's** have designed a brand new set of symbols to show you in an instant which cereals are just right for you'. There are numerous symbols: healthy bones, concentration, physical energy, heart health and low fat. **Frosties**, for example, carry the healthy bones, concentration and physical energy logos, although they are 40 per cent sugar and the healthy bones claim is based on you eating the cereal with milk. **Nestlé** use celebrity endorsement to make their health claims in both advertising and on cereals like **Shredded Wheat** and



Clusters: Ian Botham tells us to 'love your heart with Shredded Wheat' and Judith Hann tells us that 'some foods, like this cereal, use the whole of the grain which may help keep your heart healthy'. Other products like **Tetley Tea** (mentioned above) and **Asda Wheat Bisks** use a heart logo, while **Provamel Alpro soya's Yofu**, is 'approved by the Family Heart Association'.

While it is hard to take some of these claims too seriously – particularly when some are made on sugary foods and drinks – they do highlight a growing trend and a gap in food law. They also illustrate how the boundaries between 'foods' and 'medicines' are constantly being pushed. Although it is illegal for labels to be misleading, at the moment the onus is on local authority trading standards officers to prove that a product on sale is misleading. It is also illegal to say that a food can prevent, treat or cure a disease, as that would make it a medicine. However, some products, including some of those we've highlighted, are pushing at the boundaries and exploiting a lack of clear controls.

CA has been calling for a system where claims have to be checked before they are made on products to ensure that they can be substantiated. The European Commission is at last also thinking along these lines, and a proposal for legislation that will require this is expected to be published shortly. An initial draft of the proposal suggested that the use of claims which 'make reference to general, non-specific benefits of the nutrient or food for overall good health, wellbeing and normal functions of the body shall be prohibited'. It also suggested that they would only be allowed if the beneficial effects can be expected to be understood by the average consumer. Any claim making reference to psychological and behavioural functions – as several of the claims described above do – could also be prohibited.

What changes are needed?

Promised EU claims legislation should provide an opportunity to tackle many of the problems we found. We want it to:

- specify what nutrition claims such as 'low fat' and 'light' should mean and not leave it up to voluntary guidelines;
- ban '% fat free' claims;
- require health claims to be vetted to make sure they can be substantiated and don't mislead, before they can be made on foods;
- deal with implied claims (eg. product names, logos, endorsements and other forms of advertising) as well as explicit claims;
- set down criteria so that foods which are high in fat, sugar or salt can't make health claims;
- put an end to meaningless and vague claims and those that use overly technical language that consumers can't make sense of.

We also want to see tougher action from trading standards officers and the Food Standards Agency to deal with misleading and confusing claims, and a more honest approach from the food industry.

Quality assurance

Although we've focused on health and nutrition claims, we still found products on sale which could be misleading about the ingredients they contain – and could potentially confuse consumers about what they are buying. Examples included:

Snack Stop creamy chicken and sweetcorn pasta which contained just 2 per cent dried chicken and 1 per cent sweetcorn;

Tesco finest prawn, squat lobster, lemon and parsley terrine slices which contained just 6 per cent prawns and 2 per cent lobster; and

Asda maple syrup creams which contained no maple syrup.

This highlights yet again the need for a more honest approach to food labelling.



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