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FDA makes food labeling system easier for consumers

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A new food labeling system is in the works and should appear on many products this summer.

The Overall Nutritional Quality Index is a new labeling system that is being formed to help consumers choose healthy products.

ONQI consists of a 1 to 100 scale for healthy food-100 being the healthiest. The index is supposed to be a consistent way of labeling every product. ONQI is likely to appear on products this summer, but it is still being worked on and reviewed by nutrition experts and the Food and Drug Administration.

"A single program for labeling might remedy the confusion that many consumers have when they read labels," said Neal Hooker, associate professor of agricultural, environmental and development economics.

"I think that food labeling is becoming more common, and consumers are becoming more confused about what food is a good choice."

According to the 2007 Food and Health survey conducted by the International Food Information Council Foundation, 65 percent of Americans reported they read the Nutrition Facts Panels on food products.

However, many consumers misread the Nutrition Facts Panel or other food labels and make mistakes in purchasing healthy food, Hooker said.

"Consumers often buy products that may be healthy in one dimension, such as low fat content, but not healthy in another, such as high salt content," he said.

Buying groceries is not a fun task. At the supermarket, people are usually in a hurry and do not have time to read information thoroughly.

The ONQI system is supposed to be a quicker way to purchase healthy food.

"Consumers sometimes only read the front labels on products and disregard the rest of the important nutrition information on the box, such as the Nutrition Facts," Hooker said.

Food labels can be misleading, so it is important to read them before buying the product. Packaged food often boasts its contents are sugar free or reduced fat, and this is sometimes less than truthful.

The FDA has few resources to "police" every claim on food labels, Hooker said. If ambiguous wording is used on food labels, it is not always caught by the FDA, allowing consumers to often misinterpret labels.

"Large food firms are rarely fined, and as a result, some firms may come close to such terminology without actually using the legally protected claims," Hooker said.

No labels can be put on products until they are approved by the FDA, and companies, especially large corporations, are familiar with FDA regulations.

"The FDA law is very clear about getting approval for labels and where labels are supposed to be on products," said Melvin Pascall, associate professor of food science and technology.

"I'm convinced that the system in our country is well put-together to ensure correct labels," Pascall said.

However, the ONQI system might be a good step to reducing misinterpretations made by consumers. ONQI is based on numbers, which should prevent consumers from focusing on glamorous wording such as "low in fat."

Some think the ONQI scale of 1 to 100 might be too simplistic.

"Advances in personalized nutrition suggest the health benefits of a particular food won't be the same for all consumers," Hooker said. "Marketing messages, such as the ONQI scale, should address individual consumers."

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