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Food Label Information

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Abstract
Food labelling plays a crucial role in helping consumers make informed and healthy food choices. It provides essential details about a product's nutritional value, ingredients, allergens, and origin, enabling individuals to select foods that align with their health goals and lifestyle. This study focuses on the importance of food labels as a tool for consumer empowerment and public health promotion. It emphasizes how accurate, clear, and transparent information on food packages can influence purchasing behavior and improve dietary habits. With growing awareness of nutrition and wellness, understanding food labels has become increasingly important for preventing lifestyle-related diseases and promoting overall well-being.

'It not about food, it is mean to empower consumers to make choices aligned with their lifestyle goals'

Introduction

Food labelling plays a pivotal role in empowering consumers to make informed dietary choices, serving as a bridge between food producers and consumers. Labels convey critical information on nutritional content, ingredients, allergens, and origin, influencing purchasing decisions and impacting public health outcomes[1]. With rising consumer awareness about health, sustainability, and dietary restrictions, the accuracy, clarity, and regulation of food labels have become increasingly significant[2]. Effective food labelling practices not only ensure compliance with regulatory frameworks but also foster transparency and trust in the food industry.

Food labelling refers to any written, printed, or graphic matter that appears on the packaging of food products, providing essential information about the contents inside. According to the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), food labelling encompasses all tags, brands, marks, pictorial or other descriptive matter written, printed, stencilled, marked, embossed or impressed on, or attached to a container, cover or wrapper of any food product[3].

Food labels serve multiple purposes; they help consumers make informed decisions, enable regulatory authorities to monitor compliance, and allow manufacturers to communicate product benefits. A comprehensive food label typically includes the product name, list of ingredients, manufacturing and expiry dates, storage instructions, nutritional information, and manufacturer details[4].

History of food label in India

The origins of food labelling can be traced back to the 13th century in England. King John enacted the Assize of Bread, regulating the price of bread and requiring marks to indicate the manufacturer, primarily to prevent adulteration. By the 14th and 15th centuries, additional items such as wine and butter were also marked for quality and authenticity purposes. These early labelling measures focused on ensuring fairness in trade and protecting consumers from fraud rather than providing nutritional information[4].

The origins of food regulation in India can be traced from the colonial era, where provincial acts like the Bengal Food Act (1919), Assam Pure Food Act (1919), and others attempted to regulate food adulteration and quality standards. These laws varied across regions, leading to inconsistent enforcement. With the adoption of the Constitution of India, food safety became a concurrent subject, giving both central and state governments the authority to legislate[5].

In 1954, the Prevention of Food Adulteration (PFA) Act was introduced as the first central law Which was amended multiple times (1964, 1976, 1986) to close loopholes and strengthen enforcement. Alongside PFA, specific orders like the Fruit Products Order (1955), Solvent Extracted Oil Order (1967), Meat Food Products Order (1973), and the Milk and Milk Products Order (1992) were issued[6].

Recognizing the need for a consolidated and comprehensive system, India enacted the Food Safety and Standards Act (FSSA) in 2006, replacing PFA and other sector specific acts. Subsequently, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) was formed in 2011 under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare to serve as the apex food regulatory body. FSSAI introduced specific food labelling regulations through the Food Safety and Standards (Packaging and Labelling) Regulations, 2011, later updated with the Labelling and Display Regulations, 2020[7].

IMPORTANCE OF FOOD LABELLING

Food labels are vital in India due to the country's unique mix of cultural, religious, and health-related dietary considerations. They are more than just informational tools—they play a significant role in helping consumers make choices that align with their beliefs, lifestyles, and health needs. In a country where food consumption practices are diverse, transparent labelling supports both individual choice and public health. Here's why food labels matter so much in India[8]:

1. Cultural and Religious Significance: India is home to a variety of religious communities, each with specific dietary restrictions. By clearly labelling foods with vegetarian or non-vegetarian indicators, manufacturers help consumers instantly recognize if a product aligns with their dietary customs. That enable consumers to stay true to their cultural and religious principles, building trust and transparency between manufacturers and the public.
2. Health and Safety Awareness: With the rising incidence of lifestyle-related diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, and obesity in India, food labels have become a critical tool for promoting public health. Nutritional information on food labels helps consumers monitor their intake of calories, sugar, fat, and sodium, allowing them to make healthier choices. Food labels promote public health awareness.
3. Transparency on Ingredients and Allergens: Common allergens, such as peanuts, gluten, soy, and dairy, are increasingly labelled to help consumers avoid foods that may trigger adverse reactions. Additionally, food labels clarify the presence of artificial colours, Flavors, and preservatives, which are of concern for those looking to avoid synthetic additives.
4. Empowering Consumer Choice: Food labels empower consumers to make choices aligned with their lifestyle goals, whether it's following a vegetarian diet, choosing organic products, or reducing sugar intake. Labels such as "organic," "no trans fats," "high fibre," or "low sugar" help consumers quickly identify products that match their health priorities.
5. Building Accountability and Trust with Manufacturers: Mandatory labelling regulations foster accountability among food manufacturers, requiring them to disclose accurate information about what's in their products. This accountability promotes trust between consumers and brands, as consumers rely on these labels to reflect the truth about ingredients, sourcing, and quality[9].

LEGAL REQUIREMENTS

In general

- Every pre-packaged food shall carry a label.
- The information on the label shall be in English or Hindi in Devnagari script. Any other language in addition may be used.
- Theinformation shall not be false, misleading or deceptive.
- Where the container is covered by a wrapper, the wrapper shall carry the necessary information.
- The Regulation prescribes the minimum area of the container to be covered by the Principal Display Panel.
- The Regulation prescribes minimum height and width of the letters and numerals to be displayed on the label[10]

DECODE THE LABEL

1. The name of the food

The name of the food shall include trade name or description of food contained in the package that describes the true nature of the food. It is important that the name of the food must be clearly stated and not be ambiguous or misleading. If the food has been processed in some way, the process must be included in the title e.g. dried apricots, salted peanuts[10].

2. Ingredients

The name of Ingredients used in the product shall be listed in descending order of their composition by weight or volume, as the case may be, at the time of its manufacture. Specific name shall be used for ingredients in the list. Food additives and water must also be included in the list if they have been added[10].

3. Nutritional Information

Nutritional Information or nutritional facts per 100 gm or 100ml or per serving of the product shall be given on the label containing the following:

- Energy value in kcal
- The amounts of protein, carbohydrate (specify quantity of sugar) and fat in gram (g)
- The amount of any other nutrient for which a nutrition or health claim is made.
- Where the nutrition declaration is made per serving, the amount in gram (g) or milliliter (ml) in a serving shall be given.

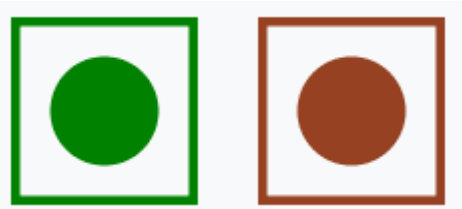
The nutritional information may not be necessary, in case of foods such as:

- Raw agricultural commodities like, wheat, rice;

- Non-nutritive products, like tea, coffee, packaged drinking water
- Alcoholic beverages
- Fruit and vegetables
- Products that comprise of single ingredient; or
- Foods served for immediate consumption such as served in hospitals, hotels or food shipped in bulk which is not for sale in that form to consumers[11]

4. Declaration regarding Veg and Non-Veg

Regulation provides that every package of "Vegetarian" food shall bear a green colour filled circle inside a square with green outline. Every package of "non-vegetarian" food shall bear a brown colour filled circle inside a square with brown outline[12].



5. Declaration regarding Food Additives

Food additives shall be listed in the ingredients list by their functional name together with specific name or recognised International numerical identifications (INS or E number) e.g. Raising agent (ammonium hydrogen carbonate) or Raising agent (503 (ii))

Extraneous addition of colouring matter to be mentioned on the label as:

'Contains permitted natural colour(s)' or 'contains permitted synthetic food colour(s)' or 'contains permitted natural and synthetic food colour(s)'

Extraneous addition of flavouring agents to be mentioned on the label as: 'contains added flavour'[12].

6. Name and complete address of the manufacturer

The name and complete address of the manufacturer and the manufacturing unit if these are located at different places. In case the manufacturer is not the packer or bottler, the name and complete address of the packing or bottling unit as the case may be. Package of food shall carry the name and complete address of the importer in India when imported[13].

7. FSSAI Logo and License No.

The FSSAI logo and license number shall be displayed on the label in contrast colour to the background. In case the food is fortified as per Food Safety and Standards (Fortification of Foods) Regulations, 2017, then the +F logo shall be displayed on the label of the food package[13].

8. Net Quantity

Net quantity by weight or volume or number, as the case may be, shall be declared on every package of food; and in addition, a food packed in a liquid medium shall carry a declaration of the drained weight of the food[14].

9. Lot/Code/Batch identification

A batch number or code number or lot number shall be declared on the label[14].

10. Date of manufacturing or packing

- In case best before date of the products is more than 3 months, month and year of manufacture or packing shall be declared.
- In case of shorter shelf life of less than 3 months the date, month and year of manufacture or packing shall be declared.
- In case of shelf life not more than seven days date of manufacture may not be required but 'Use by date' shall be mentioned[14].

11. Best Before and Use by Date

- The month and year in capital letters up to which the product is best for consumption, in the following manner: "Best Before ..... Months And Year" Or "Best Before ..... Months From Packaging" Or "Best Before .....Months from Manufacture".
- In case of package or bottle containing Sterilised or Ultra High Temperature treated milk, soya milk, flavoured milk, any package containing bread, dhokla, bhelpuri, pizza, doughnuts, khoa, paneer, or any uncanned package of fruits, vegetable, meat, fish or any other like commodity, the declaration be made as follows:— "Best Before …….Date/Month/Year" Or "Best Before.....Days From Packaging" Or "Best Before …….. Days From Manufacture".
- On packages of Aspartame, instead of Best Before date, use by date/recommended last consumption date/expiry date shall be given, which shall not be more than three years from the date of packing;
- In case of infant milk substitute and infant foods instead of Best Before date, use by date/ recommended last consumption date/expiry date shall be given.
- Declaration of best before date for consumption shall not be applicable to wines and liquors, alcoholic beverages containing 10 percent or more by volume of alcohol[15].

12. Country of Origin

The country of origin of the food shall be declared on the label of food imported into India. When a food undergoes processing in a second country which changes its nature, the country in which the processing is performed shall be considered to be the county of origin for the purposes of labelling[16].

13. Instructions for Use

Instructions for use, including reconstitution, where applicable, shall be included on the label, to ensure correct utilization of the food[16].

14. Labelling of Organic Foods

Labelling on the package of organic food shall convey full and accurate information on the organic status of the product. It shall carry Food Safety and Standard Authority of India's organic logo. Such product may carry a certification or quality assurance mark of one of the systems[16]. All organic foods shall comply with the packaging and labelling requirements specified under the Food Safety and Standards (Packaging and Labelling) Regulations, 2011. All organic foods shall comply with the labelling requirements of NPOP or PGS-India[17].

15. Allergen Warnings and Additives Disclosure

Under FSSAI regulations, allergens like peanuts, soy, gluten, and milk must be clearly labelled, as they are common triggers for allergic reactions. This transparency extends to additives, artificial colours, and preservatives, allowing consumers to make choices based on health concerns or lifestyle preferences. Commonly used labels for allergens include:

- "Contains Allergens": Identifies the specific allergen present.
- "May contain traces of…": Indicates potential cross-contamination during processing.

Some foods also disclose additives with a code (e.g., "E150" for caramel colour) or a descriptive phrase ("natural colour added"). Food additives, colours, and flavours must be listed on the label with their class titles and specific names or recognized international numerical identifications. The addition of colouring matter and extraneous flavouring agents must be mentioned on the label. The name and complete address of the manufacturer or importer must be provided on every package of food[18].

RECENT UPDATES:

FSSAI continuously updates its guidelines to improve transparency and keep up with international standards so that you, the consumer, may seek redressal for any violations in India's consumer courts. Recent changes include:

- Front-of-Pack Labelling: To combat rising health issues, the FSSAI has discussed introducing a front-of-pack labelling system that would highlight high levels of sugars, fats, and sodium.
- Trans Fat Limitations: To reduce cardiovascular risks, FSSAI mandates that packaged food labels now disclose trans-fat content, and trans-fat levels must be capped at 2% of total fat content.
- Eco-Friendly Packaging Information: Labels increasingly include instructions on recyclable packaging or sustainable practices due to rising environmental awareness[7].

CONCLUSION

From a public health perspective, accurate and transparent labelling prevents foodborne illnesses and diet related health problems, such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular conditions. Modern innovations, such as front-of-pack warning labels, traffic light coding, digital QR codes, and sustainability indicators, enhance accessibility and support both informed and rapid decision-making. Hence, educational initiatives, standardized labelling systems, and consumer friendly designs are necessary to maximize the beneficial impact of food labelling on dietary choices and public health. In essence, food labelling is indispensable for consumer empowerment, public health, and market transparency. While it cannot singlehandedly guarantee healthier dietary behaviours, it lays the foundation for informed choices, encourages responsible manufacturing practices, and complements broader interventions aimed at promoting nutrition, safety, and sustainability.

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