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Do Simple Nutrition Labels on the Grocery Store Shelf Help Consumers Make Healthier Food Choices?

New York, New York, September 12, 2017—Promoting healthy food choices is a critical component of any public health strategy designed to reduce the risk of nutrition-related chronic diseases. Nutrition labels are one tool that support consumers in making sound choices. But to what extent do consumers respond to labelling, in particular, to a simple, standardized on-shelf nutrition labelling system in supermarkets? A new [study](#) in *The Milbank Quarterly* has found that the use of a simple, at-a-glance nutritional summary of the product that is located on retail shelf tags in supermarkets resulted in small but significant shifts towards consumers purchasing food with higher nutritional ratings.

Erin Hobin of Public Health Ontario with colleagues from Duke University, University of Toronto, and University of Waterloo, looked at aggregated supermarket transaction data in three supermarket chains in Ontario—Loblaws, Zehrs, and Real Canadian Superstore—and conducted exit interviews with 783 shoppers from both intervention and control supermarkets to assess shoppers' awareness, understanding, and use of the labelling system. The other researchers were Bryan Bollinger, Jocelyn Sacco, Eli Liebman, Lana Vanderlee, Fei Zuo, Laura Rosella, Mary L'Abbe, Heather Manson, and David Hammond.

“The goal of these tools is to increase the proportion of shoppers who notice, understand, and use nutrition information to make healthier food choices for themselves and their families,” said Hobin. “Given that this is the first study in Canada to investigate the effects of an on-shelf nutrition labelling system in actual supermarkets, results can inform current and future nutrition labelling policies in Canada and globally, and provide critical information to policymakers who might be developing and mandating a simplified nutrition labelling system to support consumers in that effort.”

Background

Guiding Stars is an on-shelf nutrition labelling system that scores foods in a supermarket based on nutritional quality; scores are then translated into ratings of 0 to 3 stars. Zero star items are those that do not meet the nutritional requirements for a star rating. Except for not labelling products with a zero rating, the system is consistent with the National Academies recommendations for a well-designed front-of-package nutrition label.

Findings

- The shifts in consumer food purchasing patterns translated into measurable nutritional benefits, including more items purchased with slightly less trans fat and sugar and more fiber and omega-3 fatty acids.
- The direction and magnitude of the effect varied across food product categories, with the greatest benefits seen in categories that are perceived as healthier, like grains and breakfast cereals, dairy and eggs, fruit and vegetables, and meats, fish, and legumes.
- Increases were found in the number of products per transaction, price per product purchased, and total revenues.

- Exit surveys revealed that a modest proportion of consumers were aware or understood and trusted Guiding Stars in intervention supermarkets, and a small proportion of consumers reported using the system when making purchasing decisions.
- 47% of shoppers exposed to Guiding stars were confused when asked to interpret the meaning of a 0-star product that did not display a rating on the shelf tag.

Policymakers should consider on-shelf nutrition labeling, but should proceed with caution until research has confirmed optimal label design, clarified the mechanisms by which dietary intake is improved, and assessed associations with nutrition-related health outcomes.

About *The Milbank Quarterly*

Continuously published since 1923, *The Milbank Quarterly* features peer-reviewed original research, policy review, and analysis from academics, clinicians, and policymakers. The *Quarterly's* multidisciplinary approach and commitment to applying the best empirical research to practical policymaking offers in-depth assessments of the social, economic, historical, legal, and ethical dimensions of health and health care policy. *The Milbank Quarterly* is published in March, June, September, and December on behalf of the Milbank Memorial Fund by John Wiley & Sons. www.milbank.org/the-milbank-quarterly