

Report: Food labels need Energy Star-like ratings

October 20 2011, By LAURAN NEERGAARD , AP Medical Writer

Just like that Energy Star tag helps you choose your appliances, a new report says a rating symbol on the front of every soup can, cereal box and yogurt container could help hurried shoppers go home with the healthiest foods.

Thursday's report urges the [Food and Drug Administration](#) to adopt new food labeling that clears the confusing clutter off today's packages and gives consumers a fast way to compare their choices.

It wouldn't replace the in-depth Nutrition Facts panel that's now on the back or side of food packages. But few shoppers stop to read or heed that fine print in the middle of the grocery aisle.

The Institute of Medicine says it's time to put right upfront the most important information for health: how many calories per serving - and just how big that serving is - along with stars or some other symbol to show at a glance how the food rates for certain fats, sodium and added sugars.

"American shoppers are busy shoppers," said Ellen Wartella, a psychology professor at Northwestern University who chaired the IOM committee that studied the issue at the government's request.

"We want a really simple system that says if you have three marks, that product is healthier than one with two marks."

How to get Americans to eat more wisely is a huge problem as obesity and diet-related diseases are skyrocketing. The FDA already was working to change the food-labeling system to make it more user-friendly. The agency didn't say if it would adopt a ratings approach but called Thursday's report a thoughtful analysis that would help it decide next steps.

"FDA agrees consumers can benefit from a front-of-pack labeling system that conveys [nutrition information](#) in a manner that is simple and consistent with the Nutrition Facts panel," said spokeswoman Siobhan DeLancey.

But the IOM's recommendation would face an uphill battle with [food manufacturers](#) who are pushing their own version of on-the-front [food labels](#) and don't like the idea of ranking one food as healthier than a competitor's.

"We believe the most effective programs are those that trust consumers and not ones that tell consumers what they should and should not eat," said Scott Faber, a lobbyist for the Grocery Manufacturers Association.

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