

# Not all 'front-of-package' nutrition information produces the same effect

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Front-of-package nutrition labels serve different purposes depending on the shopping situation, according to a new study by marketing researchers at the University of Arkansas and University of Mississippi. Credit: University of Arkansas

Marketing researchers at the University of Arkansas and their colleague at the University of Mississippi compared nutrition information labels on

the front of packaged food products to understand which labels help consumers choose more healthful items. Their conclusion: It depends.

"Our research suggests that there is no single, 'one-size-fits-all' front-of-package nutrition label that is suitable for all the different types of situations in which consumers are evaluating and choosing products," said Elizabeth Howlett, professor of marketing in the Sam M. Walton College of Business.

Shoppers often find it daunting to decide which packaged [food products](#) are the healthiest. A typical supermarket carries more than 40,000 different items, and previous marketing research has shown that consumers make the vast majority (82 percent) of their purchase decisions while shopping in the store.

Consumers sometimes evaluate a single product, an activity marketing researchers call non-comparative processing. More often, however, consumers participate in comparative [information](#) processing, which means they evaluate multiple products simultaneously. For example, a consumer might ask himself whether he should purchase the French-style lemon yogurt, the Greek-style blueberry yogurt, or the low-calorie berry variety.

Comparative information processing is considerably more difficult than non-comparative processing, because consumers must make direct comparisons between several options and multiple types of calorie and nutrient information. Though these tasks are clearly very different, Nutrition Facts panels provide only one type of standardized nutrition information.

Howlett, Scot Burton, Distinguished Professor of marketing in Walton College; and Christopher Newman, assistant professor of marketing at the University of Mississippi and former doctoral student at the U of A,

examined two formats for front-of-package nutrition labels. One format provided specific, objective and quantitative information – for example, 10 grams of fat. The other format provided evaluative information, such as Walmart's green "great for you" icon.

The researchers found that the different formats worked better in different situations. A front-of-package label that provided specific, objective and quantitative information was more suited to a non-comparative choice, the instance in which a consumer is evaluating a single product. Front-of-package labels that provided evaluative information were more suited to a comparative task, when customers were evaluating multiple products.

"Currently, many different types of front-of-package nutrition information formats appear on product labels and their effectiveness in different choice contexts needs to be better understood," said Newman. "We believe that public policy decision makers such as those at the Food and Drug Administration must consider how well the type of nutrition information presented on a product label matches the consumer's specific type of choice task."

"If the primary goal of nutrition labeling is to help consumers make healthier choices, then the ability to easily identify the most healthful alternatives from a broad set of options is crucial," said Burton. "Our results suggest that, in general, when there is a match between the choice processing context and the type of format used to present front-of-package [nutrition information](#), [consumers](#) tend to make more healthful food choices. This is particularly important in comparative contexts in which evaluative information may improve choice from a set of brands."

The researchers' study was published recently in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

Provided by University of Arkansas

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