

Truthful yet misleading packaging: Consumers falsely believe that low fat means less sugar

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The "low fat" label on foods can do manufacturers and consumers more harm than good. According to a new study by Martin Luther University

Halle-Wittenberg (MLU), when manufacturers advertise their products as being low in fat, many consumers assume that they also contain less sugar. However, the sugar content of many low-fat products differs little from that of other products. Many of the respondents in the study felt deceived by this and said they would be less inclined to buy these products. The paper was published in the journal *Food Quality and Preference*.

The researchers conducted three experiments to investigate how the information on yogurt packaging influences perception and purchasing behavior. A total of 760 people from the U.S. took part in the online experiments. They were asked to rate [calorie content](#), [sugar content](#) and [fat content](#) on a scale of one to seven. They were also asked whether they would buy the product. "We wanted to find out whether information about a reduced fat content changed the overall perception of a product," says the study leader and economist Dr. Steffen Jahn from MLU.

The results showed that almost all of the respondents correctly estimated the lower calorie content of the low-fat yogurt. At the same time, they also believed that the yogurt contained less sugar than the yogurt that wasn't labeled low fat. In the second and third experiment, some of the [respondents](#) were shown the low-fat product with the actual nutritional information printed on the front. This group did correct their opinion on the sugar content, but their willingness to buy decreased, even though the low-fat yogurt contained fewer calories. Another group was shown low-fat products without the "low fat" label and their purchase intention did not change.

"Many people want to eat healthily but fail to do so for a variety of reasons. The information on food packaging also plays a role in this, as it can bias consumer perceptions," says Jahn. Some manufacturers take advantage of this effect. In Australia, a cake mix was advertised as being "97% fat free" while containing 55% [sugar](#).

"Our study shows that consumers can feel deceived by a product because, even though 'low fat' claims by manufacturers are technically true, a part of the truth is concealed," concludes Jahn. Manufacturers should rethink this practice if they want to retain their customers in the long run, says the researcher. One possibility is to place the nutritional values directly on the front of the products.

More information: Steffen Jahn et al, Truthful yet misleading: Consumer response to 'low fat' food with high sugar content, *Food Quality and Preference* (2023). DOI: [10.1016/j.foodqual.2023.104900](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodqual.2023.104900)

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