

Nutrition labeling law lowered nutrition, improved taste

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In the nearly two decades since regulations required food products to contain a "Nutrition Facts" label, the overall nutritional quality of branded food products in supermarkets has decreased while the taste of these same products has improved, according to researchers at Duke University and the University of Maryland.

Among those foods that did improve their [nutrition](#), "junk foods" or low-health products increased their nutrition more than healthier options. And among companies, those with smaller brands or fewer existing brands were more likely to make improvements to the nutrition of their products.

These findings from researchers at Duke's Fuqua School of Business and Maryland's Robert H. Smith School of Business will be published in a forthcoming edition of the journal *Marketing Science*.

The research was conducted through two studies of food products before and after the nutrition labeling regulations. The first study investigated food products in 30 product categories -- some required by the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act (NLEA) of 1993 to feature nutrition labels such as foods in supermarkets, and some not required to feature nutrition labels such as similar foods in restaurants.

The second study used a sample of brands from *Consumer Reports* to examine brand nutrition and taste for a smaller set of categories before and after the NLEA.

"We think the main reason for our results is that consumers find taste more important than nutrition, as indicated by consumption trends during this time showing increased consumption for added fats and sugars as well as a 100 percent increase in calories from snacking," said Christine Moorman, professor of business administration at Fuqua.

"And since nutrition is perceived to be negatively correlated with taste, we believe many companies decided to reduce the nutritional value of their food products after the passage of the NLEA," Moorman said. "Since nutrition labels were generally not present before the NLEA, consumers would not be aware of these changes, only that the product competed well on taste."

The changes are what Moorman and her co-authors call "unintended nutrition consequences."

The NLEA sought to eliminate untruthful nutritional claims and to improve consumers' ability to find nutrition information at the point of sale.

Manufacturers are required to display a label of nutrition facts with standardized information on all nutrients, recommended daily values and an ingredient list.

Claims of health benefits on food packaging are also regulated for truthful content. Prior to adoption of the NLEA, most [food products](#) did not commonly disclose nutrition information, which made comparisons within and across food categories difficult for consumers.

"It would be reasonable to assume the NLEA's required labels would help consumers find healthful foods and stimulate competition to improve brand nutrition," said Rosellina Ferraro, assistant professor of marketing at Smith. "Our research indicates food producers were reluctant to improve nutrition on the belief that consumers will perceive better nutrition as a taste tradeoff."

While the nutritional value of most foods declined in the years following the NLEA, some foods have improved nutrition. The researchers found brands in low-health categories (e.g., potato chips) and small-portion categories (e.g., peanut butter) improved nutrition more than brands competing in high-health categories (e.g., bread) or large-portion categories (e.g., frozen dinners).

Likewise, smaller companies in a food category and those companies with fewer existing brands were more likely to improve nutrition.

"This makes sense because companies may have hoped to grab the attention of health-conscious consumers while many of their large counterparts hesitated for fear of negative consumer reactions," Moorman said.

"In some significant ways, the NLEA has brought about results that are nearly the opposite of what was intended," Moorman said. "The policy lesson is that well-meaning regulation that forces the disclosure of information on an attribute (e.g., nutrition) that is less important than another attribute (e.g., taste) is not likely to encourage companies to compete on the disclosed attribute. Instead they will compete on the most important attribute."

Therefore, the ongoing challenge for food producers, policy makers and public health advocates is to increase the value consumers place on nutrition and to reduce the perceived nutrition-taste tradeoff, the authors argue.

More information: The research is available [online](#).

Provided by Duke University

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