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From Shelf Tags to On-Pack Symbols, Supermarkets Get in the Game of Nutrient Profiling

BY SYLVIA GEIGER, MS, RD

First there were on-pack nutrition symbols from food manufacturers, health organizations and trade groups (“Seeing Spots in the Supermarket? Learn How Nutrition Symbols Influence Which Foods We Buy” in the March/April 2008 issue of ADA Times). Now supermarket chains across the country are rolling out their own profiling systems—many in the form of shelf-tag programs—to help shoppers identify healthy foods. But with each profiling system using different criteria to determine healthfulness, how individual foods can rate according to different systems can vary, sometimes surprisingly.

Before food and diet were at the forefront of public health, consumer research into factors that affect food product sales centered largely on price and taste preferences. As Americans become increasingly aware of the connection between diet and health, there is a growing interest in which nutrition symbols, health claims and information sources they consider when purchasing food.

According to ADA's *Nutrition and You: Trends 2008* survey, 67 percent of consumers rate diet and nutrition as "very important." Yet of those surveyed, only 35 percent listed on-package health symbols as credible nutrition information. And even fewer respondents (9 percent), identified food manufacturers as credible sources of nutrition information.

So how do shoppers decide which claims to trust? A recent article in *Nutrition Today* says consumers are more likely to consider purchasing a product if a nutrition-health connection is clearly identified. For example, "calcium-rich foods such as yogurt may reduce the risk of osteoporosis" is more effective than an on-package message identifying yogurt simply as "a good source of calcium." Another study in *Appetite* finds consumers are more likely to trust nutrition symbols that are endorsed by third parties such as health organizations—and the simpler the symbol or icon, the better.

These findings seem to be in line with those of nutrition profiling system developers. "We did extensive consumer research and what we heard consistently from our shoppers is that they want clarity—a quick and easy way to identify the healthiest foods in the store without having to read every label," says Paulette Thompson, MS, RD, Stop & Shop health and wellness manager who helped develop the Healthy Ideas symbol.

But some nutrition experts are not convinced that shelf tags will provide any clarity. "Shoppers in urban areas will be exposed to two or three different systems—how could that possibly add clarity? Consumers will get information overload and tune it all out," says Bonnie Tandy Leblang, MS, RD, syndicated columnist and blogger. "All these profiling systems are a nutrition free-for-all, reminiscent

of the days before we had the Nutrition Facts Panel. Anything goes."

Does anything go for nutrition symbols and shelf tags? No, according to Vincent DeJesus, MS, RD, in the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Office of Nutrition, Labeling and Dietary Supplements. "The FDA doesn't have separate regulations that address nutrition information provided on shelf tags, but they still must comply with existing food labeling statutes and provide consumers with truthful and non-misleading information."

Whether shoppers will find such programs helpful or confusing remains to be seen, but as the food and nutrition experts, registered dietitians should be familiar with the nuances of the nutrient profiling systems. Following are summaries of five current or upcoming nutrient profiling programs in supermarkets. Three of the programs feature shelf-tag symbols, one is an on-package symbol program and one is a combination of both shelf-tag and on-package symbols. (And to put the different systems into context, see how some popular food products rated among the programs.)

GUIDING STARS

Currently in East Coast store chains with launches in other supermarkets across the country by fall, Guiding Stars was developed by an advisory panel including scientists from Dartmouth Medical School and the University of North Carolina. This shelf-tag program uses proprietary (unpublished) algorithms to rate foods. The formulas credit a product's score for a host of vitamins, minerals, dietary fiber and whole grains and debit the score for trans fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, added sugars and added sodium. When credits outweigh debits, the product gets a star based on 100-calorie standardization for nutrient density.

Qualifying foods are further ranked by nutrient density and awarded one (good), two (better) or three (best) stars. There are four different algorithms in use, based on the inherent nutrient differences between foods: general groceries including whole grains; meats/seafood/poultry/dairy/nuts; baby/toddler foods; and fats and oils (a category with only one macronutrient). Supermarkets pay a licensing fee to use the Guiding Stars system.



HEALTHY IDEAS

Developed for Giant Food and Stop & Shop supermarkets by an advisory panel of physicians and nutritionists and affiliated with Harvard Medical School, Healthy Ideas rates foods using nutrition threshold criteria rather than a mathematical formula. To qualify for the Healthy Ideas symbol, a food must meet the FDA definition of "healthy" and provide at least 10 percent of the DRI for one or more of the following nutrients: fiber, protein, vitamin A or C, calcium or iron. Some food categories such as dairy or dried fruits with added ingredients have additional cut-offs for total sugars per regular amount commonly consumed—or RACC. This ranges from ≤22g per RACC, or up to ≤35 percent of weight.

Many foods not considered important sources of nutrients are not rated. All fresh produce automatically qualify for the symbol and other foods such as pretzels, chips, popcorn and granola bars are rated because they are considered to be important sources of grains. Approximately 4,000 packaged foods, or 28 percent of the typical grocery store, qualify for the shelf-tag symbol. The symbol will also appear on-package for selected store brands.

NUTRITION IQ

Developed by Supervalu, Inc. in collaboration with registered dietitians at the Joslin Diabetes Center, the Nutrition IQ profiling system uses color-coded shelf-tag bars to identify foods that meet specific nutrient thresholds for sodium, saturated fat and, in some cases, sugar. Each product is then compared to the 11 nutrient content claims criteria established by the FDA, such as "good" or "excellent" source of fiber or calcium, or the "low sodium" claim. If a food qualifies for a nutrient content claim, it is identified with a color coded shelf-tag.

The color codes, which do not have any particular meaning beyond the program, include: orange (fiber), blue (calcium); dark green (sodium), purple (low calorie), red (low saturated fat), dark orange (first ingredient is a whole grain) and yellow (foods with 10 percent DV protein). No food will have more than two shelf tags and approximately 10 percent of grocery items receives a shelf tag. The program will roll out across Supervalu's grocery stores nationwide over the next six months.

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How would these foods score?

While not all food products are rated by every nutrient profiling system, the programs agreed to participate in an illustration of how four popular name-brand products *would* score with their system. Ratings are for theoretical example only and may not appear with the actual product in stores.

Perdue Perfect Portions® Skinless Boneless Chicken Breast



Serving Size: 4.8 oz.

Amount Per Serving (%DV)

Calories 130

Total Fat 1.5g (2%)

Saturated Fat 0g

Trans Fat 0g

Cholesterol 80mg (27%)

Sodium 350mg (15%)

Total Carbohydrate 0g (0%)

Sugars 0g

Protein 29g

Calcium (0% DV)

Iron (8%)

Vitamin A (0%)

Vitamin C (2%)

Guiding Stars
Would qualify
for 3 stars**



Healthy Ideas
Would qualify
for symbol



Nutrition iQ
Not rated*

NOT
RATED

NuVal
Would score
39 out of 100**



Smart Choices
Would not qualify
for symbol



Nutrition Facts Source: perdue.com/products/product_detail.html?category_id=3&id=367

* Nutrition iQ currently does not rate fresh meats, poultry or fish.

** Guiding Stars and NuVal reflects unseasoned boneless, skinless chicken breast regardless of brand.

Dannon Light&Fit Vanilla Yogurt



Serving Size: 6 oz. (170g)

Amount Per Serving (%DV)

Calories 80

Total Fat 0g (0%)

Saturated Fat 0g

Trans Fat 0g

Cholesterol <5mg (1%)

Sodium 75mg (3%)

Potassium 230mg (7%)

Total Carbohydrate 16g (5%)

Sugars 11g

Protein 5g (10%)

Vitamin A (8%)

Calcium (15%)

Vitamin D (20%)

Riboflavin (15%)

Phosphorus (15%)

Not a significant source
of Dietary Fiber, Vitamin C
and Iron.

Guiding Stars
Would qualify
for 2 stars



Healthy Ideas
Would qualify
for symbol



Nutrition iQ
"Excellent source
calcium" | "Good
source protein"



NuVal
Would score
81 out of 100



Smart Choices
Would qualify
for symbol



Nutrition Facts Source: lightnfit.com/products/light_and_fit/light_and_fit.html

Planters® Lightly Salted Cocktail Peanuts



Serving Size: 1 oz.

Amount Per Serving (%DV)

Calories 170

Total Fat 15g (23%)

Saturated Fat 2g (10%)

Cholesterol 0mg (0%)

Sodium 55mg (2%)

Total Carbohydrate 5g (2%)

Dietary Fiber 2g (7%)

Sugars 1g

Protein 7g

Calcium (0%)

Iron (2%)

Vitamin A (0%)

Vitamin C (0%)

Guiding Stars
Would qualify
for 3 stars**



Healthy Ideas
Would not qualify
for symbol



Nutrition iQ
Would not qualify
for symbol



NuVal
Would score
23 out of 100*



Smart Choices
Would qualify
for symbol



Nutrition Facts Source: planters.com/varieties/peanuts.aspx

* Estimated score.

Kellogg's Frosted Flakes Cereal



Serving Size: 3/4 cup

Amount Per Serving (%DV)

Calories 110

Total Fat 0g (0%)

Saturated Fat 0g (0%)

Trans Fat 0g

Cholesterol 0mg (0%)

Sodium 140mg (6%)

Potassium 20mg (1%)

Total Carbohydrate 27g (9%)

Dietary Fiber 1g (3%)

Sugars 11g

Other carbohydrate 15g

Protein 1g

Vitamin A (10%)

Vitamin C (10%)

Calcium (0%)

Iron (25%)

Vitamin D (10%)

Thiamin (25%)

Riboflavin (25%)

Niacin (25%)

Vitamin B₆ (25%)

Folic Acid (25%)

Vitamin B₁₂ (25%)

Guiding Stars
Would not qualify
for any stars



Healthy Ideas
Would not qualify
for symbol



Nutrition iQ
Would not qualify
for symbol



NuVal
Would score
22 out of 100



Smart Choices
Would qualify
for symbol



Nutrition Facts Source: www2.kelloggs.com/Product/ProductDetail.aspx?product=450
NOTE: Above reflects cereal alone.

Visit eatright.org/adatimes for an extended article including rationale for product ratings and additional insight on shelf-tag and on-package programs. And special thanks to the nutrient profiling programs for analyzing these food products to provide data for the purpose of this chart.

