

Q Can you explain the various systems for highlighting nutrient characteristics of some food products? This would be useful when I help clients navigate the supermarket.

A When it comes to navigating the supermarket, consumers are interested in dietary guidance and cues to help them make food choices that are in step with their personal nutrition goals. A look at some consumer insights and public health and regulatory perspectives provides a framework for understanding such programs.

Recommendations for Healthful Eating

The message is out. As nutrition professionals know, dietary guidance developed by expert committees after careful review of sound scientific data supports advice to eat healthful diets based on wise choices from and among different food groups, without exceeding calorie needs. To help consumers act on this guidance, many countries around the world include specific recommendations for food group choices to promote health benefits such as adequate intake of key nutrients and decreased risk for some chronic diseases. One example, *Nutrition and Your Health: Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2005*, encourages US consumers to eat three or more one-ounce equivalents of whole-grain products daily, with the remainder of recommended amounts of grain foods to come from enriched or whole-grain options (1). The “behind-the-scenes” scientific basis for this advice is that whole grains are important sources of complex carbohydrates and 14 nutrients, including fiber. Additionally, there is evidence that healthful diets rich in whole grains can help reduce the risk of coronary heart disease and type 2 diabetes and may help with weight control (2).

Consumer Insights

Consumers hear the message. In its 2006 *Food & Health Survey: Consumer Attitudes toward Food, Nutrition & Health* (3), the International Food Information Council (IFIC) Foundation found that most of those surveyed believed diet influences health and 57% reported making a change to improve the healthfulness of their diet within the past six months. Reasons selected from a list of options included: improve overall health (69%), lose weight (62%), manage a specific health condition (37%) and maintain

weight (19%). Examples of dietary changes were eating more of a specific food component (e.g., fiber, calcium, vitamin C), choosing more of a specific type of food or beverage (e.g., more whole grains, fruits and vegetables), eating less of a specific food component (e.g., fat or sugar), eating fewer calories, changing meal and/or snack patterns, limiting portions or eating or drinking less of a specific type of food or beverage.

Many consumers want help with making dietary changes. When asked what sources were most influential in prompting them to make the dietary changes cited, health professionals, family and friends, and food product labels rose to the top among those responding to the IFIC survey. Almost two-thirds of the 57% who reported making dietary changes said these three sources had at least some role in their decisions (3). Now consider the large number of choices available to consumers shopping for food products. Then add in the finding that, despite interest in eating more healthfully, consumers continue to rank taste and price above healthfulness when identifying factors that influence their food and beverage purchases (3). It is understandable that consumers who want to eat healthier diets are looking for advice and/or cues when it comes to making such choices for themselves and their families.

Public Health/Food Industry/Regulatory Perspectives

Developing “cues” to help consumers make choices. For a number of years, public health advocates, regulatory experts and food industry groups have explored ways to categorize food products based on nutritional composition. Government regulatory groups responsible for food labeling regulations have established specific criteria for “on package” nutrient content claims (e.g., low fat, high fiber, calcium-rich) and health claims. More recently, some others (e.g., health organizations, food manufacturers, retailers) have developed additional systems to help consumers select products that support their personal nutrition goals.

Such systems may differ in specific criteria, but generally are based on either a threshold model or a scoring model (4).

- A threshold model evaluates a food’s nutrient composition against maximum or minimum levels (*thresholds*) of key nutrients. *Maximum* or *cut-off* criteria apply to nutrients with recommended public health limits (e.g., saturated and *trans* fats, sugar or sodium); some systems also have calorie cut-points. *Minimum* or *at least* criteria apply to nutrients or food components of which many people don’t get enough (e.g., certain vitamins and minerals, fiber, vegetables, fruits, whole grains). Using this model, qualifying products that meet specific thresholds can carry an icon, positive symbol or flag.

One example is the American Heart Association's Food Certification Program (identified by a distinctive red heart with a white check mark), which was developed to provide consumer information and simplify heart-smart product choices.

- A scoring model evaluates the same types of nutrients and food components by adding points for *negative* nutrients and subtracting points for *positive* nutrients and food components to get a food's *score*. Examples are the British Food Standards Agency's model developed to guide marketing of foods to children and the Snackwise Nutrition Rating System program piloted by the Borden Center for Nutrition and Wellness (a part of the Columbus (Ohio) Children's Hospital) to rate the nutritional value of many foods available for school vending machines.

Threshold models are typically viewed as "informational" systems that can help consumers identify products with positive nutritional attributes (e.g., whole grains, fruit, calcium, fiber) and/or less fat, sugar, sodium or calories per serving, compared to other products within a specific category. Such systems highlight cues for making personal choices without excluding other options. Further, threshold models usually recognize basic differences among foods (e.g., a cheese slice has a different nutrition profile than a serving of crackers). Scoring models are often viewed as somewhat prescriptive—a product makes the grade or it does not. Foods that do not receive a qualifying score may be excluded from certain venues (e.g., vending machines, advertisements). There is concern that such systems set up "good" vs. "bad" food choices. Further, scoring systems that do not differentiate among food categories and/or on a per serving basis may not accurately reflect real dietary patterns and may inadvertently penalize nutritious products (e.g., vegetable oils, nuts).

Helping Consumers Identify "Cues" in the Supermarket

Nutrition professionals can foster wise food choices within the supermarket by creating awareness of and helping consumers use available resources. Examples include food manufacturers' websites, in-store educational pamphlets and important information on food labels (e.g., the Nutrition Facts panel, ingredient statement, nutrient content claims and health claims). Nutrition professionals can also suggest cues to help consumers choose a healthful variety of foods. Strategies might include promoting "powerhouse" veggies and fruits through color choices, identifying whole grain foods by finding key terms (e.g., whole wheat, graham flour, oatmeal, whole grain corn) at the beginning

of the ingredient statement, encouraging consumers to opt for "fat free" or "low-fat" dairy foods and "extra lean" or "lean" cuts of meat and helping them look for useful cues on packaged foods. With your guidance, consumers will be better able to put the advice to "get the most nutrition out of your calories" (5) into action for their healthful eating plans.

References:

1. *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2005*. US Department of Health and Human Services and US Department of Agriculture. Available at: www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines/dga2005/document/. Accessed August 15, 2006.
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3. *Food & Health Survey, 2006: Consumer Attitudes Toward Food, Nutrition & Health*. International Food Information Council (IFIC) Foundation. Available at: www.ific.org/research/foodandhealthsurvey.cfm. Accessed August 7, 2006.
4. Joppen L. Nutrient profiling: fine line between good and bad: controversial concept here to stay. *Food Engineering & Ingredients*. March, 2006; 35-9.
5. *Finding Your Way to a Healthier You: Based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. (Consumer Brochure) US Department of Health and Human Services and US Department of Agriculture. Washington, DC, 2005. Available at: www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines/dga2005/document/pdf/brochure.pdf. Accessed August 29, 2006.