Consumer perspectives on food labels1–4

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ABSTRACT
The symposium “Dietary Reference Intakes (DRIs) for Food Labeling” explored the scientific debate about the most appropriate DRI values to use in establishing Daily Values on food labels. An important goal of nutrition and ingredient information is to help consumers make healthful dietary choices. This summary provides highlights from recent quantitative and qualitative research on consumers’ use and understanding of food label information. Am J Clin Nutr 2006;83(suppl):1235S.

KEY WORDS Daily Values, Dietary Reference Intakes, focus groups, consumers

INTRODUCTION
Quantitative research conducted in 2003 by the International Food Information Council (IFIC) Foundation indicated that consumers refer to food labels when deciding which foods to purchase or eat. More than 8 of 10 consumers (83%) looked at ingredients or nutrition information at least sometimes; 11% always looked; 32%, almost always; and 40%, sometimes. Only 13% rarely used the information, and 4% never did.

HIGHER AWARENESS THAN USE
Consumers showed high awareness of the information on nutrition labels. When aided, they were most aware of calories (89%), followed by total fat (81%), sodium (75%), sugars (73%), carbohydrates (72%), saturated fat (71%), and cholesterol (66%). This ranking provides insight into the relative importance consumers place on each of these items.

When purchasing or choosing food, consumers consider calories (58%) and total fat (56%) first, followed by sodium and saturated fat (both at 45%), sugars (42%), cholesterol (39%), and carbohydrates (34%). In all categories, awareness of the information was much higher than use.

According to the 2004 Food Marketing Institute’s Shopping for Health survey, most consumers (83%) always or sometimes check the Nutrition Facts panel when buying foods for the first time. Nearly one-half (48%) check the Nutrition Facts panel to purchase healthy foods for their family, and nearly one-quarter (23%) do so to lose weight.

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS
Qualitative research conducted by the IFIC Foundation in 2004 provides further insights into consumers’ attitudes and understanding of nutrition information on food packages. Of 4 focus groups conducted in Baltimore and Chicago, participants in 3 groups were identified as “health conscious,” meaning that they looked for nutrition information on food packages and used it to make decisions. Men and women in the fourth group were identified as “not very health conscious,” meaning that they did not pay attention to nutrition information on food packages or use the information to make decisions.

Consumers in these focus groups recognized nutrition information on food packages as a tool to help improve their health. When asked how they could improve their health or weight, they named “reading food labels” as one of many strategies, along with making better food choices, controlling portions, exercising, getting more sleep, drinking more water, and others.

Similar to respondents in the IFIC Foundation quantitative survey, consumers in the focus groups were aware of basic information on food labels. Unaided, they identified the following elements (in no particular order): fat, calories, carbohydrates, fiber, serving size, protein, sugars, and Daily Value.

CONFUSION ABOUT % DAILY VALUE
Although consumers in the focus groups were aware of food label information, many were confused about the % Daily Value. Their comments included “I don’t think the [Food and Drug Administration] puts it there,” “I think food companies define it,” and “I don’t think people really know that.” Nevertheless, they said that a % Daily Value for calories might be a helpful tool if explained to them.

CONCLUSION
Overall, consumers have mixed views on food labeling. Some find it useful for making better food choices, whereas others believe it is too complicated and should be easier to use. Although it is important for nutrition scientists to debate the best Dietary Reference Intake values to use in establishing the Daily Values for food labels, we need to be realistic about consumers’ understanding and use of the food label and of this data.

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2 Presented at the ASNS/ASCN Public Information Committee Symposium “Dietary Reference Intakes (DRIs) for Food Labeling,” held in San Diego, CA, 4 April 2005.
3 This article is based on proprietary data gathered from surveys and focus groups.
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