

Food Labelling & Portion Size: Helping your Patient's Health?

Rachel Hackett, IGD

Understanding portion size can have a major influence on weight control but many consumers find this a confusing area. Rachel Hackett, Nutrition and Scientific Affairs Manager, Institute of Grocery Distribution (IGD) clarifies how to help consumers understand food packaging.

The government and food and grocery industry have been increasingly concerned with enabling consumers to make informed decisions on how to eat a healthy, balanced diet. This has been driven by rising levels of obesity within the population and associated diseases, increased labelling regulations and government and consumer pressure.

On-pack labelling

One of the ways to help consumers make informed decisions is to provide nutrition information on food and drink labels. Although only legally required where a nutrition or health claim is made, many food manufacturers routinely provide back-of-pack nutrition information across their product ranges and some also provide it on front-of-pack. But while nutrition information may be clearly displayed on food and drink labelling, do consumers know how much to eat?

An academic workshop convened by the Food Standards Agency in 2008 to assess the evidence around portion size and its impact on energy intake and weight reported that there was sufficient evidence to take action¹. For the food industry, portion size is an important consideration for food labelling. If manufacturers wish to provide information per portion or per serving in addition to per 100g or 100ml specified in legislation, they must first determine what a portion is for that product.

Determining portion size

IGD's Industry Nutrition Strategy Group (INSG) convened a working group to examine what the industry and other stakeholders were using to determine portion sizes and how this information was being communicated.

The working group looked across a range of organisations in the food and grocery sector, as well as government, non-government organisations and healthcare professional groups. Results showed that most food portion recommendations were based on a consistent set of food or nutrition-based criteria originating from government or expert body publications - despite the variety of organisations and businesses communicating portion size information. However, the application of these criteria varied according to the owner's or another body's interpretation.

In addition, factors unrelated to nutrition influenced final portion sizes. Consumer perception regarding **value for money**, **consistency within a category** and meeting expectations. Despite the similarities underpinning approaches to portion size, the working group found much variation in the way in which it was communicated. For example, different formats might be used for front and back-of-pack information, or the language used in the portion

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information differed to that used elsewhere on the pack. The working group recommended that good practice communication to consumers about portion size should be promoted².

In terms of the impact of portion sizes on intake, it was noted that the majority of work had been carried out in the laboratory environment. The report therefore made a further recommendation that research on portion size and eating behaviour in free-living individuals should be carried out in order to understand the relationship between excess intakes and portion size.

What nutrition and portion size information do consumers want to see on packaging?

The INSG's next steps were to address the recommendation to promote good practice communication on portion size, and to develop voluntary guidelines for food businesses on communicating portion size to consumers.

Consumers' views about portion size information on food and drinks were explored and the results used to help identify the information consumers wanted to see on packaging. Dietitians and nutritionists who regularly discuss portion sizes with their patients or clients, were asked for their opinions on the most effective ways to communicate portion size.

Our research indicated that consumers welcome:

1. Simple, clear guidance, e.g. nutrition information displayed per unit, per item or an indication of the number of servings in the pack where products are not discrete single serve items.
2. Systems using familiar objects to help judge appropriate portions, e.g. guidance given in numbers of teaspoons or tablespoons.
3. Portion markings on the side of packs.

Any guidance should take care not to be over-prescriptive. When we asked consumers who they thought was responsible for providing guidance on the amount of food they should eat, 75% said it was the responsibility of the individual.

Results from the survey of dietitians supported the use of everyday objects as effective tools to communicate portion size, with the majority of those who responded to the survey indicating that they used this approach³.

IGD guidelines

The voluntary guidelines on communicating portion size to consumers have been made available to food businesses to help them with both on-pack information and other communications aimed at helping consumers understand and manage the quantity of food they need to eat.

IGD's voluntary guidelines to businesses for on-pack portion size information that makes sense to the consumer!

- A portion or serving size provided on pack with nutrition information for that portion size where possible (and not just per 100g or 100ml). This increases visibility and makes the concept of portion size more familiar to consumers.
- Portion size should be based on how the product is intended to be used – if it is intended that the product be consumed in one eating occasion, the portion size should reflect this.
- Consumers may require different advice if it is possible for the product to be consumed in more than one way, such as some recipe dishes. For example, a vegetable accompaniment for 2 people may alternatively be used as a vegetarian main meal for 1 person – the nutrition information should be provided to reflect both these scenarios.
- Language used in the nutrition information should be the same on the front and back-of-pack. There are no obvious consumer preferences for portion or serving, however, whichever term is used should be the same on front and back-of-pack.
- Language used in marketing text should be consistent with that used for the nutrition information. This helps to clarify that the portion size information refers directly to the product contained in the pack, and to a clear quantity of that product.
- Language should be consistent with same brand and category of products. This is helpful to consumers who may purchase or compare other products from one brand.
- Additional wording or descriptions should be used to reinforce the portion size messages, but care should be taken to avoid appearing over-prescriptive! Indicating that information is guidance, for example, suggesting that the quantity given is a “typical serving” may be helpful where judgement is required such as for pasta or cereals.
- Multi-serve packs should clearly show the number of servings in the pack. Use of fractions to indicate portion size is problematic to consumers, it is frequently unavoidable for multi-serve products. However, measures can be taken to avoid confusion. For example, if the nutrition information indicates ‘A quarter of a pot contains’, the front of pack should clearly state ‘Pot contains 4 servings’.

Consumer communications

In addition to labelling of packaged retail goods, the guidelines provide suggestions for other consumer communications about portion size, including:

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- the opportunity to visualise portions on the pack where possible, such as using side of pack markings for pourable products, or markings on the side of blocks such as for butter or cheese
- the use of everyday objects to help express portion size, such as tablespoons full, matchbox, or tennis ball sized etc

The voluntary guidelines recognise that there are gaps in our understanding of consumer behaviour that still need to be addressed, for example, there is little information on which to base guidance on communication to customers by caterers.

The voluntary guidelines on communicating portion size to consumers were published in October 2009. Food businesses are encouraged to use them to provide portion size information in a way that consumers find easy to understand and helpful.

www.igd.com/diethealthnutrition

References

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