

Letter dated:
Helsinki, 6.3.2006

From:
The Finnish Consumers' Association

To:
DG SANCO
Unit C4—Health Determinants

Statement from the Finnish Consumers' Association

The Finnish Consumers' Association considers the European Commission's Green Paper on promoting healthy diet and physical activity to be an important undertaking. This statement is chiefly concerned with issues relating to nutritional information.

Consumer information

The majority of foodstuffs sold in Finland are packaged and choices should be made by reading the labelling on the packaging. According to an extensive survey in the Nordic countries, package labelling is considered to be an important starting point for information, but people are lazy about reading labels. One reason given is the purchasing of familiar products; the label has perhaps been read once, but after that it is assumed that the content remains the same.

There are particular problems with labelling of nutritional content. The Finnish Consumer Association has for years been holding "package labelling workshops" in its local associations and has found that consumers' basic information about nutrition is poor. Many consumers do not have any idea about their own energy needs. Consequently, it is impossible to assess information on the energy value of foods in relation to their own needs. On the basis of the Consumers' Association's experience, when making their choices, consumers can make use of the fat percentage indicated in package labelling.

Dietary choice is not a project.

Dietary choice cannot be treated as a project, because every generation needs information. It is needed at every stage of life: childhood, becoming independent, setting up home, having children and reaching old age. Getting the message across requires many different channels. Consumer organisations work closely with consumers throughout their life and can reach them when, because of their situation, they are not covered by any system. Many organisations have been able to promote healthy dietary choices without the help of regular funding.

Packaging labels can inform customers.

The Finnish Consumers' Association considers that the labels required by law are adequate, but that trade and industry should clarify the labelling.

1. Labels must be clear and printed in sufficiently large characters.
2. Information on the nutritional content should be in table form and organised in the same way for all products to make comparison between them easier.
3. Energy-producing nutrients should be marked in coloured fields: fat in yellow, proteins in red and carbohydrates in green.

4. The labelling of a ready-made food portion, i.e. the portion to be eaten in one serving, should always indicate the nutritional content of the entire portion.
5. The energy value should be indicated in kilocalories rather than joules. Kilocalories are a more familiar unit to consumers.
6. Salt should be indicated as salt. Indicating the amount of Na does not give the consumer understandable information on the amount of salt.

The EAN code as an aid to public health

In practice consumers now already have many new technology tools, whose programmes enable them to assess their food intake and consumption. Information on the content of foods is a problem. Currently, companies designing dietary programmes draw their information from different sources. All food packaging has an EAN code which can contain information on the nutritional content of the food. The Finnish Consumers' Association proposes that a project should be started in the follow-up to the Green Paper to promote the use of new technology and the EAN code as a tool for choosing foods.

Other

1. EU funded sales promotion campaigns should support healthy nutrition
2. The content of food aid should support nutrition policy
3. The VAT on canteen food should be reduced.
4. School and crèche lunches should take children's health into account.

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