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Standardization of Front-of-Package Nutrition Labeling to Promote Healthier, Safer, and more Environmentally Friendly Food Choices

This policy proposal seeks to urge legislators within the House Energy and Commerce Committee's Subcommittee on Health to expedite the revision process for the Truth in Labeling Act (H.R. 6766) (1), schedule a vote date, and strengthen its provisions to address potential agricultural and industrial pollutant exposure in consumer products that pose long-term health risks. These provisions would ensure that consumers are better informed about potential hazards in their food and beverage choices.

Background

Current food labeling standards remain inadequate, and a lack of transparency in the nutrient composition, safety, and sustainability practices of foods sold in retail environments may contribute to rising obesity rates, particularly among families with young children (Table 1). This issue persists despite ongoing efforts by organizations to improve consumer dietary choices. While health-promoting labeling practices exist – for example, Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)-approved food products feature front-of-package labels to promote healthier choices for pregnant, breastfeeding, and postpartum women, as well as infants and children in vulnerable low-income and food-insecure populations (2,3) – consumers must still navigate convoluted text on back-of-package labels and conduct their own research to assess whether food products align with their health and sustainability concerns.

Additionally, some food products, including certain WIC-approved items, may be produced using unsustainable or potentially toxic practices, leaving consumers unaware of their exposure to harmful contaminants in their food (5). Pesticides, heavy metals, and chemical residues from fertilizers and processing agents can accumulate in food and water sources, increasing the risk of neurotoxicity, endocrine disruption, chronic diseases such as cancer and cardiovascular disorders, and neurodevelopmental disabilities (5, 6). Without standardized front-of-package disclosures, consumers—particularly those with limited time, literacy, or access to detailed nutritional knowledge—struggle to make fully informed purchasing decisions, a challenge further intensified by today's overwhelming food environment and where consciousness over healthy, sustainable food choices is increasing (7).

| | Overweight for age (does not factor height) | | |
|--|---|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Fast food eaten how many times on previous day | Overweight for age ↕ | Not overweight for age ↕ | All ↕ |
| No times | 63.5% (54.2 - 72.8) 160,000 | 67.6% (64.2 - 70.9) 780,000 | 66.8% (63.5 - 70.2) 940,000 |
| One time | 32.9% (24.0 - 41.8) 83,000 | 29.5% (26.1 - 32.9) 340,000 | 30.1% (26.8 - 33.4) 423,000 |
| Two or more times | 3.6% * (1.3 - 5.8) 9,000 | 3.0% (1.6 - 4.3) 34,000 | 3.1% (1.8 - 4.3) 43,000 |
| Total | 100.0% 251,000 | 100.0% 1,155,000 | 100.0% 1,406,000 |

Table 1: Fast-food intake among overweight and not overweight children (ages 3-17) in LA County.

The data was supplied from the California Health Interview Survey (4). Notable findings include a trend of greater fast-food intake on the day before survey administration in overweight compared to not overweight children (ages 3-17).

Impact

Implementing standardized front-of-package labeling will empower consumers to make more informed decisions when selecting foods, ultimately aiding in the prevention of diet-related health issues. By increasing transparency, this policy can help mitigate chronic diseases such as obesity, cardiovascular disease, and neurodevelopmental disorders that are influenced by dietary choices and exposure to agricultural and industrial pollutants. Additionally, it may incentivize manufacturers to reconsider the economic viability of using harmful ingredients and chemicals in consumer products. If mandatory labeling leads to reduced consumer demand or increased production costs, manufacturers may opt to limit or eliminate the use of substances that pose health risks or contribute to environmental degradation. As a result, this policy can potentially drive industry-wide reform, promoting public health and sustainable food production practices.

Recommendations

1. We recommend that legislators pass a bill to enforce the standardization of visually accessible, front-of-package labels for foods sold in retail settings, as outlined in the proposed Truth in Labeling Act.
2. We also recommend that the House Energy and Commerce Committee's Subcommittee on Health revise the Truth in Labeling Act to include front-of-package warning labels that address exposure to harmful agricultural and industrial contaminants in food and beverage products sold at retail markets and grocery stores.
3. Lastly, we urge legislators to expedite the review process of the Truth in Labeling Act and schedule the bill to a vote.

Conclusion

Increasing transparency in food labeling practices and making information more accessible to consumers on the front-of-package can only benefit the public by empowering them to make healthier choices. The current lack of standardized disclosures leaves many consumers vulnerable to exposure to harmful agricultural and industrial contaminants, potentially leading to long-term health risks. By urging the Committee on Health to revise the Truth in Labeling Act (H.R. 6766), we can ensure that food products are clearly labeled, allowing consumers to make informed decisions that promote better health outcomes. Expediting the bill's revision and vote will help address pressing public health concerns related to the composition, safety, and sustainability of foods accessible in the retail market. Ultimately, this policy can drive positive change in both consumer behavior and industry practices, fostering a healthier and more informed society.

References

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