

REPORT

A QUALITATIVE CONSUMER STUDY
RELATED TO NUTRITION CONTENT
CLAIMS ON FOOD LABELS

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A QUALITATIVE CONSUMER STUDY RELATED TO NUTRITION CONTENT CLAIMS ON FOOD LABELS

Report to



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INTRODUCTION

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study was conducted to gain qualitative information from consumers to assist FSANZ in the future development and review of food labelling standards, codes of practice and guidelines. In particular, FSANZ has a need for information to assist in determining:

- the most appropriate criteria and conditions for making specific nutrition content claims, whilst ensuring consistency between Australia and New Zealand; and
- the possible labelling requirements for food type dietary supplements (FTDS) from a consumer perspective.

Two concurrent studies were commissioned from NFO Donovan Research that address each of these objectives. This report deals with the findings of the first study, which explored consumers' familiarity and use of eight different types of nutrition content claims. The study was also intended to explore the feasibility and usefulness of disclaimers in assisting consumers' trust and understanding of such claims. Lastly, the study examined whether other forms of nutrition information on the label, such as the nutrition information panel (NIP) are used in conjunction with nutrition content claims.

The research was conducted with consumers in Australia and New Zealand, via ten focus group discussions. Participants were selected on the basis of their level of health consciousness, in terms of their food buying, as well as demographic and geographic characteristics.

The results show that many consumers in this study are highly engaged in reading and investigating nutrition content claims. Most participants fell into one of three 'types' of shoppers, when it comes to using nutrition content claims: 'inquirers', 'believers' and 'non-users'. The majority of consumers were inquirers; however consumers in this largest group varied in the amount of effort they put into claim inquiry, and the appropriateness of the decisions based on their inquiry.

Claims in general

Nutrition content claims can provide the impetus or permission to pick up a new product; a quick way to find the product again during repeat purchase; and/or quick way to avoid the product, because it is considered to be of inferior taste or quality to the 'regular' version. Such claims are used as a guide when assessing a product for the first time, rather than taken at face value. The majority of consumers voluntarily made a clear distinction between information on the front of the pack (advertising) and on the back of the pack (the facts). Nutrition content claims on the front are usually verified, via the NIP on the back, to determine whether the claim is 'correct' and/or to assess the nutritional value of the whole product. However price, taste, and a consumer's intended use for the product can over-ride any health and nutrition benefit.

Most consumers in this study had an underlying level of scepticism and cynicism about nutrition content claims and the intention of manufacturers in using them. It was widely assumed that nutrition content claims should not be trusted, implicitly, and that manufacturers are using claims to persuade them to buy a product, rather than simply inform them about the product.

Although the use and verification of a nutrition content claim can be a highly involved process, it is usually done only once for each particular brand and product, after which the claim is either trusted or accepted and then used to identify the product as a suitable selection for repeat purchase, or it is avoided because it failed to offer an acceptable taste trade-off.

Comparative Claims – ‘reduced’, ‘increased’ and ‘less than’

Research participants were highly familiar with the various comparative claims included in this study. More than any other type of nutrition content claim, it was felt that comparative claims required verification by using the NIP. This was because the comparative claim terms were regarded as too generic to be useful in their own right. For most consumers in this study comparative claims implied that the product was healthier than the ‘original’, but not necessarily a healthy or better choice. There was a high level of scepticism about these terms in all groups, and a great deal of confusion between these and other terms common to them, such as ‘low’, ‘lite’ and ‘diet’. The ‘reduced’ claim was understood to mean lower than the ‘normal’ version. Generally consumers were more sceptical about this term than ‘low’, but found it difficult to distinguish between them. The claim ‘increased’ was less familiar to consumers, because it is usually associated with nutrients of less significance to them. Consumers were much less sceptical about ‘increased’ and ‘less than’ claims, as long as they were used in a quantified context.

‘Free’ Claims

All consumers in this study were familiar with ‘free’ claims, which they are using more extensively. In comparison to comparative claims, ‘free’ claims are viewed much more favourably, because they are not making any sort of comparison to any other food, and are viewed as more helpful and more definite than claims like ‘reduced’ or ‘low’. All participants came to the unanimous decision that ‘free’ should mean ‘zero’, although some felt it was unlikely that this was how manufacturers used the term. There was also universal agreement that ‘free’ should be based on absolute absence and not nutritional insignificance. Views about ‘free’ also differed for fat compared to sugar. Whilst ‘fat free’ claims were viewed as more straightforward, some consumers were highly distrustful of ‘sugar free’ claims because it was felt that ‘free’ did not mean the product was free of other sweeteners or hidden types of sugar.

'% Fat Free' Claims

All research participants were familiar with '% fat free' claims, which, like 'free' claims, they are also using more extensively. Consumers felt even more positively towards these claims than they did about 'fat free' claims, because they were more definitive and therefore viewed as more reliable. The most commonly raised limitation of '% fat free' claims was that the claim does not immediately reveal how much fat is in the product. Very few consciously looked beyond the percentage to think about the amount of fat they would be consuming from the product. The majority of participants felt that a percentage 'fat free' below 90% was misleading and should not be permitted.

Cholesterol Claims

Overall, very few consumers paid any attention to cholesterol claims. Those most attentive to these claims were consumers with a special interest in cholesterol or heart disease, or those in the upper age group 45-64yrs. Participants in this study that did have special health needs associated with cholesterol or heart disease demonstrated a fairly good capacity to assess cholesterol and other claims, using the NIP to evaluate the suitability of the product for themselves. Most used the NIP to assess the amount of saturated fat in the product and based their product choice on this information. Consumers with medically diagnosed cholesterol conditions found fat claims, and saturated fat information in the NIP of more use than cholesterol claims. Amongst these participants, as well as those who are cholesterol-conscious, the only cholesterol claim that is deemed 'reliable' is 'cholesterol free'.

Carbohydrate and Protein Claims

Most participants reported to pay little attention to carbohydrate and protein claims, and do not regard foods carrying these claims as being of interest or relevance to them. Although carbohydrate and protein claims were not viewed as the same thing, both were associated with sports and energy drinks and powders. They were considered only relevant or applicable for people who had significantly greater energy or body weight needs, such as athletes and body builders.

'No added' Claims – 'no added sugar', 'no added salt', 'unsweetened'

The 'no added sugar' claim was most familiar to consumers, compared to 'no added salt' and 'unsweetened' claims. The meaning of 'no added' was unequivocally understood to mean that the product had only 'natural' sugar or salt, with nothing added. It was also widely understood that 'no added' claims did not imply that the product had 'none' of the nutrient in question. Research participants were far less sceptical of 'no added' claims than most other claims, and use of the NIP to verify 'no added' claims was therefore less necessary. 'Inquirers' and those consumers with special health needs felt that disclaimers, that made reference to the NIP or to the presence of 'natural sugar or salt', were unnecessary for 'no added' claims. However other consumers responded positively to the disclaimer 'contains natural salt/sugar' because it removed the ambiguity by clarifying whether the product was sugar or salt 'free'.

'Lite/Light' Claims

Light/lite' claims were widely recognised and used within their perceived limitations. 'Inquirers' were overwhelmingly negative towards these claims, viewing them as ambiguous, misleading, confusing and/or outright 'trickery'. Most consumers in this study did not know what characteristic or nutrient the claim referred to, and by default would assume that it referred to the nutrient in the food that most needed reducing, in most cases fat. The overwhelming majority of consumers in this study were in favour of a disclaimer that identifies the nutritional or non-nutritional characteristic of the food to which 'lite/light' refers. The addition of such disclaimers was felt to be important, and would increase participants' understanding of the 'light/lite' claim, and its credibility.

Diet

This claim was viewed as the least trustworthy and most ambiguous of all claims, and mostly irrelevant to consumers in this research. It was used least, and was mostly associated with weight loss products and therefore deemed useful only for people who are on weight loss 'diets'. Most consumers had strongly negative views about this claim.

Additional Disqualifying Criteria

Overall, the concept of additional disqualifying criteria was not well supported. Apart from one or two 'inquirers' in each group, who strongly agreed with the concept of disqualifying criteria, the majority of participants felt that the two examples used in this study were unnecessary. Consumers on the whole felt capable of deciding for themselves whether a product was an overall healthy choice for them. Whilst disqualifying criteria relating to the claimed nutrient was seen by some participants as important or reasonable, this view was far from widespread. The rationale for disqualifying products that are high in a nutrient other than the one they have made a claim about was not well understood, and universally not supported.

A Need for Education

This study has identified a need to inform and educate consumers about nutrition content claims. Consumers are looking for standardisation and agreed meaning behind the various words and terms used in content claims. They are confused and frustrated because there is no common consumer understanding of terms such as 'high', 'low', 'reduced', 'source of', 'light' etc. There is also no awareness or understanding that there are 'rules' around the use of nutrition content claims, and that most nutrition content claims do have meaning that is commonly understood by manufacturers.

In some cases participants were overly and unnecessarily critical of manufacturers and nutrition content claims because they were unaware that recommended standards and limits are applied, through the current Code of Practice on *Nutrient Claims in Food Labels and in Advertisements*. Most have assumed the terminology and wording of nutrition content claims is haphazard and ad hoc, determined by what is popular, and therefore most attractive to manufacturers rather than consumers.

In addition, regulatory authorities may wish to give consideration to the advantages (and disadvantages) of consumers' current distinction between information on the front and back of food packages, as this will have implications as to where new labelling requirements should be positioned.

2 BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

2.1 Background to The Research

Food Standards Australia New Zealand is an independent bi-national organisation that has the role, in collaboration with other organisations, to protect the health and safety of the people in Australia and New Zealand through the maintenance of a safe food supply. In December 2002, FSANZ was responsible for devising the Joint Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code, a component of which contains food labelling requirements for manufacturers, in order for consumers to make informed decisions about food products that are available.

As part of FSANZ's responsibility to develop and review food standards, codes of practice and guidelines, FSANZ also has a need for information to assist in determining:

1. the most appropriate criteria and conditions for making specific nutrition content claims, whilst ensuring consistency between Australia and New Zealand; and
2. the possible labelling requirements for food type dietary supplements (FTDS) from a consumer perspective.

Prior to the introduction of the Code, FSANZ commissioned NFO Donovan Research to conduct a large qualitative¹ and quantitative² research project to investigate and quantify consumers' awareness, knowledge and understanding of fifteen different food labelling elements. This research provided useful insight into consumers' use of nutrition content claims; however there was insufficient scope to investigate the understanding and use of nutrition content claims in detail.

The purpose of this study was therefore to explore these issues in greater depth, and thus to examine consumers' familiarity and use of eight different types of nutrition content claims. The study was also intended to explore the feasibility and usefulness of disclaimers in assisting consumers' trust and understanding of such claims. Lastly, the study examined whether other forms of nutrition information on the label, such as the nutrition information panel (NIP) are used in conjunction with nutrition content claims.

2.2 Background issues about and definitions of nutrition content claims

Nutrition content claims refer to a nutrition characteristic or the amount of a nutrient to be found in the product. Common claims include 'low fat', 'high fibre' or more generally, terms such as 'lite'. A wide range of nutrition content claims are made through a variety of means including food labels and in-store, radio, television, newspaper, magazines and internet advertising. Claims may be in terms of the level of nutrient contained, or it may be comparative.

¹ *Food Labelling Issues: Qualitative Research with Consumers. FSANZ Evaluation Report Series No 3*

² *Food Labelling Issues: Quantitative Research with Consumers. FSANZ Evaluation Report Series No 4*

The majority of nutrition content claims are currently managed by the Code of Practice on *Nutrient Claims in Food Labels and in Advertisements* (CoPoNC) in Australia. In New Zealand, similar claims were regulated under the New Zealand Food Regulations 1984 until they were repealed in December 2002. The Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code (Volume 2) also has provisions for some nutrition content claims in Standard 1.2.8. A summary of Volume 2 and CoPoNC criteria that relate to the nutrition content claims examined in this study can be found in Appendix D for further reference.

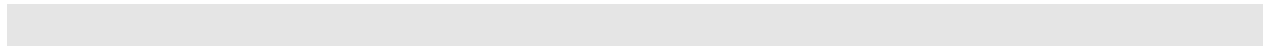
2.3 Research Objectives

The overall objective of the research project was to explore how consumers **perceive** and **use** nutrition content claims and FTDS labels when purchasing food products. Because of the scope of the research, and complexity of each topic, the findings are presented in separate reports. This report deals with Nutrition Content Claims.

The specific objectives for the nutrition content claims research activity were to assess:

1. Whether consumers were familiar with various nutrition content claims
2. The adequacy of information provided in the form of nutrition content claims to enable consumers to make informed choices about food products;
3. Whether specific nutrition content claims on labels and in advertising such as 'free', 'x% fat free' 'reduced' 'no cholesterol', 'lite', 'diet' and 'no added salt/sugar' were misleading to consumers;
4. Whether other forms of nutrition content information were used by consumers in conjunction with nutrition content claims;
5. The usefulness of disclaimers in assisting consumers' understanding of specific nutrition content claims;
6. Whether consumers believe that disqualifying criteria should apply to some or all of nutrition content claims, and
7. How consumers used nutrition content claims in food choice.

METHODOLOGY



3 METHODOLOGY

The research utilised a qualitative methodology consisting of ten 1.5 hour focus group discussions with consumers. Slightly more groups were allocated to Australia than New Zealand, as follows:

- Six groups in Australia;
- Four groups in New Zealand.

The group allocation was skewed in this way in consideration of Australia’s larger population and the desire to include additional locations, as well as to balance the skew of groups towards New Zealand in the concurrent study about Food Type Dietary Supplements.

3.1 Group Structure

In order to explore fully the issues of nutrition content claims, the research was conducted primarily with people who claim to use nutrition content claims in some way.

Previous research conducted by NFO Donovan Research identified that the following groups are more likely than other groups to use nutrition content claims:

- People aged 35-64;
- Females;
- People who are highly health conscious;
- People with special health needs.

For this reason, people who were less concerned about health issues, and very young consumers (under 25 years) and older consumers (65+ years) were excluded. Emphasis was placed on those who were more health conscious and people with special needs.

In order to enhance group synergy, groups were also structured to include the same socio economic status. The groups were therefore structured as follows:

Australian component:

Health consciousness Level	AGE GROUP		SES
	25-44	45-64	
1 - Special health needs		2 groups	Low
2 - Highly health conscious consumers	2 groups		High/Low
3 - Moderately health conscious consumers	1 group	1 group	High/Low

New Zealand Component:

Health consciousness Level	AGE GROUP		SES
	25-44	45-64	
1 - Special health needs	1 group	1 group	Low
2 - Highly health conscious consumers	1 group	1 group	High
3 - Moderately health conscious consumers			

Participants were recruited on the basis that they were ‘the main (or equal) household food shopper’. Most groups included a minimum of two males.

It was neither within the size nor scope of this research to conduct dedicated research groups with particular ethnic or indigenous groups in either country. It was determined by FSANZ that each of these special groups would be included in the study to the extent that the naturally occurred during recruitment. In New Zealand the natural selection of ethnic and in particular indigenous (Maori) people was greater than it was in Australia, and most New Zealand groups therefore included one or two ethnic and/or Maori participants.

3.2 Research Locations

Groups were held in three states/ territories in Australia and in two cities in the North Island of New Zealand. In Australia, states were selected to provide a mix of a more populous State (and a large metropolitan area) and a less populated State (and a mid-sized city).

The groups were mainly held in metropolitan locations, with two regional groups conducted in Australia. The smaller number of groups conducted in New Zealand did not permit the inclusion of a regional location.

AUSTRALIA		NEW ZEALAND	
Sydney	1 group	Auckland	2 groups
Bathurst	1 group	Wellington	2 groups
Wollongong	1 group		
Canberra (pilot)	1 group		
Perth	2 groups		
Total	6 groups		4 groups

One group was used to pilot the discussion guide and group procedure. This group was held in Canberra.

3.3 Recruitment

To ensure quality recruitment services and compliance with privacy legislation, all participants were recruited using IQCA accredited recruitment companies. Companies used were J&S Research (NSW and ACT), Surveys Australia (WA) and NFO New Zealand.

Potential participants were selected on the basis of their responses to a recruitment screening questionnaire, which was in accordance with the group structure characteristics above (Appendix A). Approximately eight people attended each focus group and a total of eighty-four people participated in the study.

Metropolitan groups were held in focus group facilities whereas non-metropolitan groups were held in a central location to participants (ie hotel function room, community centre).

Australian participants were offered AUD50 for their time and New Zealand participants were offered NZD40. These amounts are in keeping with 'standard' consumer rates in each country.

3.4 Discussion Guide and Group Procedure

NFO Donovan Research developed a Discussion Guide in consultation with FSANZ, taking into account the issues that had been identified in the project brief and subsequent meetings. The discussion topics moved through familiarity with and use of each of eight different types of nutrition content claims, perceptions of trust towards various claims, and reactions to a range of labelling alternatives, disclaimers and disqualifying criteria for nutrition content claims. A copy of the discussion guide can be found in Appendix B.

All sessions were conducted in a structured way in order to cover the breadth of issues and claim types, and to increase engagement with the issues.

Two individual written tasks on familiarity and use of nutrition content claims were completed at the commencement of each group prior to the influence of the group discussion (Appendix C).

In order to focus the discussion on each of the different types of nutrition content claims under investigation (see Section 6), the moderator referred to hand-held showcards (Appendix D) that displayed nutrition content claims. A range of different products were also provided, which participants could pick up and pass around. Owing to the extensive amount of information that needed to be covered for each type of nutrition content claim, each focus group covered only four of the eight types of nutrition content claims.

4 PREFACE

The results indicate high familiarity with and use of one or more types of nutrition content claims, and a fairly good capacity to interpret claims using the NIP. This may reflect the fact that this study only includes ‘highly’ and ‘moderately’ health conscious consumers, and those with a ‘special health need’ (each are defined in Appendix 2). However, there is also evidence³ to suggest that these groups of consumers are in fact the majority rather than minority of consumers in Australia and New Zealand.

- Whilst not directly comparable, a previous quantitative survey with consumers indicated that just over half of Australian and New Zealand consumers (59%) report that they have a special health need, and a similar proportion (55%) are ‘highly’ health conscious. Another third (33%) are ‘moderately’ health conscious, and only 12% are less or unconcerned about the health or nutritional value of the foods they buy.
- Whilst the present study therefore only reflects the attitudes and actions of consumers who fit into some segments of the population, we suggest that the ‘missing’ segment of consumers in this study (ie those unconcerned or less concerned about health and nutrition) is a relatively small segment of the population.

For the purposes of this study function claims were regarded separately to nutrition content claims, and are not included in discussions.

References to ‘consumers’ refer to consumers in this study. Although the study involved a reasonably large number of consumers for qualitative research (n=84), it must be remembered that the results of this research cannot be extrapolated to the general population. This is because participants recruited to qualitative research are drawn from large group participant databases, rather than the total population of Australian and New Zealand households.

A mix of metropolitan and regional locations was included so as to capture the broad spectrum of views and experiences, which may be influenced by geographic location, rather than to draw comparisons between locations. Obvious differences between Australia and New Zealand consumers are reported.

Following accepted best practice for reporting qualitative research, this report:

- Focuses on views, opinions and experiences that were fairly consistent across the groups. Opinions are reported as ‘majority’ opinions (held by approximately three quarters of the group referred to), or ‘minority’ opinions, expressed as ‘very few’ or ‘a much smaller proportion’ of consumers;
- Does not document isolated, or ‘one off’ comments, which have the potential to be misleading, and can distort the overall conclusions. In the few instances where

³ *Food Labelling Issues: Quantitative Research with Consumers. FSANZ Evaluation Report Series No 4*

reporting an isolated comment is deemed appropriate, it is clearly identified as a peripheral view, and not representative of 'mainstream' opinion / experience.

5 OUR APPROACH TO THE INCLUSION OF NUTRITION CONTENT CLAIMS

As part of the research brief for this project, FSANZ provided a summary of the various nutrition content claims that were to be investigated. These were divided into eight different categories:

- **Comparative** claims – using terms such as ‘reduced’, ‘increased’, or ‘less than’;
- **‘Free’** – eg ‘sugar free’, ‘fat free’, ‘cholesterol free’ and ‘gluten free’. ‘Gluten free’ was excluded from the study after the pilot group because it raised too many distracting issues that were not central to this project;
- **‘% fat free’** – eg ‘99% fat free’, ‘96% fat free’ etc;
- **Cholesterol** – using terms such as ‘low in cholesterol’, ‘reduced in cholesterol’ and ‘cholesterol free’;
- **Carbohydrate and protein claims** – using terms such as ‘high in’, ‘low in’, and ‘source of’;
- **‘No added sugar’, ‘unsweetened’ and ‘no added salt/sodium’**
- **‘Lite/light’** claims; and
- **‘Diet’** claims.

During the group discussion and written tasks these eight categories were referred to as ‘eight different types of claims’ and results for each category are presented in separate sections of this report.

RESULTS



6 THE ROLE OF NUTRITION CONTENT CLAIMS IN FOOD SHOPPING

Consumers in Australia and New Zealand do not distinguish immediately between nutrition content claims and other specific label elements, nor do they clearly distinguish between different types of nutrition content claims.

Label reading, and nutrition content claim reading in particular, is largely a spontaneous behaviour that is done to varying extents depending on a range of factors – the product itself; familiarity with the product or brand; time available; reasons for buying the product and for whom; and interest in or concern about the nutritional value of the food, or particular nutrient(s) of interest. Whilst many consumers in this research initially denied that they are label readers, most could nonetheless contribute extensively to the discussion about nutrition content claims and demonstrated having paid repeated, if not regular attention to them.

Key findings:

1. Most consumers in this study fell into one of three ‘types’ of shoppers, when it comes to using nutrition content claims: inquirers, believers and non-users. The majority of consumers are inquirers.
2. Nutrition content claims can influence purchase behaviour by providing:
 - the impetus or permission to pick up a new product;
 - a quick way to find the product again during repeat purchase; and/or
 - a quick way to avoid the product, because it is considered to be of inferior taste or quality to the ‘regular’ version.
3. Nutrition content claims are used as a guide when assessing a product for the first time, rather than taken at face value.
4. The majority of consumers made a clear distinction between information on the front of the pack (advertising) and on the back of the pack (the facts). There is an underlying level of scepticism and cynicism about nutrition content claims and the intention of manufacturers in using them. Most consumers, therefore, assume that nutrition content claims should not be trusted, implicitly, and that manufacturers are using claims to persuade them to buy a product, rather than simply inform them about the product.
5. Nutrition content claims on the front are usually verified, via the NIP on the back, to determine whether the claim is ‘correct’ and/or to assess the nutritional value of the whole product. However price, taste, and a consumer’s intended use for the product can over-ride any health and nutrition benefit.
6. This study provides evidence of consumers’ awareness of nutrient trade offs.

6.1 Who uses nutrition content claims?

Included in this study were consumers with wide ranging interest in nutrition label information, and nutrition content claims. As discussed earlier (see Section 4), this study excluded consumers who are unconcerned about the nutritional composition and health implications of the foods they buy. However, we hypothesise that this is a relatively small proportion of the population.

Most consumers in this study fell into one of three ‘types’ of shoppers, when it comes to using nutrition content claims: *inquirers*, *believers* and *non-users*. Each is described below.

The majority of consumers were inquirers

About two thirds of the participants in this study could be described as ‘inquirers’. Inquirers are interested in the health or nutritional value of the foods they buy. They often question the validity of nutrition content claims and are sufficiently motivated to further assess the nutritional value of the product, usually by using the NIP or ingredients list. Inquirers are not totally preoccupied by nutrition – only the most health conscious of shoppers, usually those with a special health need, embark on a shopping trip with their primary goal being to buy, for example, ‘low fat’ or ‘cholesterol free’. However, inquirers draw on their awareness and know-how when prompted by nutrition content claims.

Inquirers are not a homogenous group, and differ by the varying motivators and drivers behind their interest in health, and differing degrees of commitment to the amount of effort they will put into product assessment. Consequently, there are various ‘shades’ of inquirers, and there are times throughout this report when it is important to make a distinction between this large group of inquirer participants, in which case they are referred to as ‘less active’ and ‘more active’ and ‘very active’ inquirers.

Inquirers have at least one nutrient that is significant to them. Indeed, many inquirers have two or three ‘**significant nutrients**’, which are unconsciously arranged in a hierarchy of importance. The significant nutrient(s) for most consumers include **fat, salt, sugar** and to a much lesser degree carbohydrates and energy. The most significant nutrient, for any consumer, will depend on their own informal education and/or health need, and it may vary depending on the product category as well as who the product is intended for. The significant nutrient is more than a nutrient of interest, it is the nutrient that matters most to them when short-listing or assessing products, and it is the one inquirers fall back on when product decisions become too hard, confusing or when time does not permit extensive product evaluation.

Low education does not mean a consumer is uneducated about labels

In almost all focus groups, including those recruited as low SES (based on education and postcode) and/or only moderately health conscious, the majority of participants demonstrated a degree of scepticism about one or more types of nutrition content claims, and a capacity to assess the claim using further information on the package. Their capacity to question and clarify nutrition content claims appeared to have very little to do with their level of formal education. Although those who had achieved higher levels of education were often more efficient in their use of the NIP, they were no more sceptical than lesser-educated participants. Most participants had educated themselves with regards to nutrition content claims, usually through increased awareness via media stories and comparing products and NIPs in store or at home.

Believers

Compared to inquirers, a much smaller proportion of consumers trust the nutrition content claim absolutely, or tend to err on the side of trusting the claim. These shoppers are less motivated to investigate nutrition content claims further and are unlikely to compare products in store as part of their purchase decision.

In most focus groups, irrespective of SES or health consciousness, one or two participants fell into this category, admitting to having selected products based on the nutrition content claim and assuming that they were choosing a 'better' or 'healthier' product.

One focus group (low SES, special health needs, 45-64yr olds) stood out as a group of believers. This group had very low awareness of what various nutrition content claims meant, even though they relied upon claims heavily for product selection. The existence of a nutrition content claim for this group implied that the food was better for you than the normal counterpart or reference food. For example, when asked about their views of a milk product labelled "96% fat free" they felt it would surely be lower in fat than 'standard' milk and therefore a 'better' choice (when in fact standard milk is 4% fat, or 96% fat free):

"well it has to be doesn't it? They are claiming that it is 96% fat free, where as on full cream milk there is no claim...most people know that full cream milk has a lot of fat"

Non-users

A similarly sized proportion of consumers, compared to believers, described themselves as paying no attention to labels or nutrition content claims. These shoppers either had no interest or motivation to notice claims, or claimed to buy no or very few packaged foods. There were far fewer non-users who had special needs or were highly health conscious, and far more who were moderately health conscious.

Yet another group of consumers deliberately avoided products with nutrition content claims. These consumers were typically looking for what they described as the ‘plain packet’ or the ‘original’ product, and bemoaned the fact that it was getting harder and harder to find the ‘normal’ product that had not been altered in some way. Most of these consumers viewed the product carrying a nutrition content claim to be inferior in taste, or they felt it had things added or taken from it in ways that made it undesirable.

6.2 How are nutrition content claims used?

Nutrition content claims can influence consumers in three ways, by providing:

- the impetus or permission to pick up a new product;
 - a quick way to find the product again during repeat purchase; and
 - a quick way to avoid the product, because it is considered to be of inferior taste or quality to the ‘regular’ version.
- } Inquirers & believers
→ Non-users

Nutrition content claims are used as a guide when assessing a product for the first time

Nutrition content claims, generally, are regarded as a guide. For the majority, the message given in a nutrition content claim is rarely taken at face value until the consumer has verified it.

“It can give you an indication so it is somewhere to start. It is your starting point of investigating that particular product and then you take that into consideration”. (NZ, lower SES, special health needs, 25-44yrs)

Nutrition content claims give permission to pick up a product, and certainly appear to influence what is taken off the shelf ‘first’ and what is left behind.

“That’s what makes me pick it up, that’s what gets it off the shelf, to have a look at it or to try it. (Aust., lower SES, moderately health conscious, 45-64yrs)

The front versus the back of the pack

The majority of inquirers made a clear and absolute distinction between the information on the front and back of a food package.

“the stuff on the front is advertising and the stuff on the back isn’t” (Aust., upper SES, moderately health conscious, 25-44yrs)

Information on the ‘front’ of the package was viewed as marketing information that was predominantly there to persuade consumers to buy the product. Therefore for most inquirers, nutrition content claims in general could not or should not be trusted absolutely, without investigating further. In contrast, the information on the ‘back’ of the

package was deemed entirely believable and trustworthy. This trust was mostly attributed to the Nutrition Information Panel (NIP) but also to the ingredients list, the country of origin label and manufacturer details, and health or allergen warnings that were also recalled to be on the back of the pack.

Short-listing and verifying nutrition content claims

Inquirers described nutrition content claims as a quick way to sift through the range of products and brands on a shelf.

“initially, there are so many products and if you’re trying to get your week’s shopping done it helps you to pick that up first [pointing to product example] and have a look if it suits you and if it doesn’t you’ll try something else”.
(Aust., lower SES, moderately health conscious, 45-64yrs)

For inquirers and believers, the claim will be personally relevant when it relates to an individuals’ most significant nutrient of interest, and the purchase decision will be shaped, initially, around this nutrient first. From here, believers will often proceed straight to purchase, where as inquirers usually undertake one or a combination of the following in their decision whether to purchase the product.

- **Verify whether the nutrition content claim is ‘correct’ or ‘true’, via the NIP**

At this point, inquirers are seeking to achieve one of two things:

- confirm, using the ‘believable’ information on the back of the pack, that the claim is accurate – ie that it meets their own interpretation of what the claim means; or
- ascertain what is meant by the claim, and so they will be looking to solve questions such as ‘how low is low?’, ‘how reduced is reduced?’, ‘does this really contain absolutely no sugar? (‘free’ claim)’, ‘what does lite mean?’

Decisions around the perceived accuracy of nutrient content claims are based on consumers’ assessment of exactly how much of the claimed nutrient is in the product. Their decisions about the suitability of a claim were made on the basis of whether the product meets their own permissible amount of the nutrient or ‘trigger’ point at which they will not buy – this could be a percentage, such as ‘no more than ten percent fat’ or an amount of the nutrient in grams, such as ‘no more than ten grams of fat’. Trigger points varied widely between individuals, and may not have matched the criteria laid out in the Code of Practice on *Nutrient claims in food labels and in advertisements*.

- **Assess the nutritional value of the whole product**

This involves using the NIP, and to a lesser extent the ingredients list to investigate whether the product has unacceptable amounts of other nutrients, which make the product undesirable. The majority of consumers in this research were very aware of nutrient ‘trade-offs’, and were seeking to check that a product with nutrition content claim that made a product appear healthy in one way was not ‘bad for you’ or

'unhealthy' in another way. Participants recounted many examples of when a product has claimed to be 'low fat' or a '% fat free', but has also been unacceptably high in sugar or salt. Yogurt and rice crackers were commonly cited examples. The most nutritionally aware inquirers, of which there were very few across the whole study, also mentioned checking for energy values in trade offs, however most participants were preoccupied with nutrients like fat and sugar. It is in this context of nutrient trade-offs that consumers began to talk spontaneously about nutrition content claims being misleading. We discuss this issue in further detail in Section 6.5 and 6.4 and in sections that refer to specific nutrition content claims.

- **Price**

Price is still a most important consideration, and it was generally accepted that the 'healthier' version of products often cost more, particularly products with nutrients that have been significantly altered (by 20% – 30). Most consumers (including highly and moderately health conscious consumers) would not be prepared to pay more for small reductions (less than 5%) in the amount of their significant nutrient(s). For example, paying more for a 99% fat free product compared to a 96% fat free product would not be deemed good value for money. However, the influence of price and the constant offer of product specials also means that consumers are exposed to and are assessing many more product label elements than might first have been imagined. In this product special scenario, inquirers would still investigate the nutritional value of a discounted product before deeming it a suitable purchase for them, and would not necessarily buy the cheaper product if it did not meet their requirements for their significant nutrient(s).

- **Taste**

Nutrition content claims do not unequivocally imply that the product is 'better' or 'good', and it was widely acknowledged that nutrition content claims such as 'less'/'low'/'free' often come at the expense of taste. Such expectations are both imagined and also based on previous negative experiences.

"sometimes reduced means reduced taste as well"

"if having low fat means you're going to have low taste, then there's no point in eating it, to me I'd rather have something that's high in fat and have a smaller amount" (Aust., lower SES, moderately health conscious, 45-64yrs)

- **Intention for the product**

The importance of the nutrition content claim will also depend on how the consumer intends to use the product – significant nutrients and health issues take on more or less influence depending on how much they intend to consume, what contribution it will make to the meal or snack, what else it will be eaten with, and who it will be eaten by.

It is important to note that no one of these factors outweighs the others every time; the decision to purchase and the role the nutrition content claim plays in that decision depends on the product itself. For example heavy margarine users placed more value on salt-reduced varieties of margarine than did consumers who described themselves as light users – hence the same consumer, for whom fat is the nutrient of significance, will vary the importance they place on a ‘salt-reduced’ claim depending on the product. Similarly a consumer might buy two types of margarine, one ‘salt-reduced’ and one that isn’t, so as to cater for the different health needs of her family.

Although the use and verification of a nutrition content claim can be a highly involved process, it is usually done only once for each particular brand and product, after which the claim is either trusted accepted and then used to identify the product as a suitable selection for repeat purchase. At this time the product may also be avoided because it failed to offer a tolerable taste trade-off.

All this takes time!

Inquirers appeared to spend a lot of in-store shopping time evaluating nutrition content claims. Consumers with special health needs and those who were most attentive to their nutrient(s) of significance were most prepared to dedicate ‘what ever it takes’ to ensure appropriate product selection. For these shoppers, the time-saving benefit of nutrition content claims was a somewhat of a myth, because most claims needed to be verified by using the NIP. However it is difficult to know whether these consumers would be reading the NIP regardless, or whether the increase of nutrition content claims in recent years has prompted their awareness of nutrient information and the NIP.

It should also be noted that not all consumers in this study dedicated this amount of time and effort to investigating nutrition content claims. The ‘non-user’ shoppers, particularly younger single people and men were less attentive. As well, this study excluded very young and older adults (under age 24 and over 65 years) and those who were unconcerned about health issues - two groups that we would assume, from previous quantitative research, would spend less time reading or using labels⁴.

6.3 What is inferred from nutrition content claims – how are they useful?

Nutrition content claims are most useful as a quick and easy way to find a previously ‘approved’ product, or to quickly make a shortlist of products that are then investigated via the NIP before a final decision is made.

There was a general recognition and agreement that nutrition content claims do not imply that the product is healthy, just ‘healthier’ than another in a comparative category or brand.

⁴ *Food Labelling Issues: Quantitative Research with Consumers. FSANZ Evaluation Report Series No 4*

“Say, like this can here, and it says it’s got 5% fruit juice so you kind of take the attitude “well it’s gotta be better for you than something that hasn’t got any fruit juice at all”, or something like hilo milk, it’s gotta be better for you than full cream milk. You don’t 100% believe...it’s totally good for you, you don’t believe everything that is fed to you, but you do sort of think well, it’s gotta be better for me than this (the other) one. It all ads up.”

Although nutrition content claims and other label information are mainly used in the decision making process for never-tried products, this does not mean that such claims are rarely used. Consumers in this research were clearly exposed to new products and brands each time they shop, and were far more familiar with using nutrition content claims than they had first thought.

Most consumers were using nutrition content claims widely, hoping for a cumulative benefit over the day/week or for their overall diet. This was described as the overall benefit of ‘eating a little bit healthier’ during the day.

“I think for me it comes back to “every little bit helps”. My husband...I used to buy two lots of everything, two lots of milk and two lots of dressing...and that got a bit tiresome and expensive, so I must admit we’ve come to a bit of a compromise now in that, if I do the shopping I get mine, if he does the shopping he gets his, but I grab the fat free one because overall, I must be doing better than if I was not doing it.”

The role of the nutrition content claim is most important for health conscious shoppers and those with special health needs; however for most other consumers, price and taste remain the main reasons for buying the products they do.

Nutrition content claims are used mostly for ‘everyday’ foods, such as dairy foods, juice, breakfast cereals, and canned foods, and generally not for ‘special’ foods, such as cheese, chocolate, icecream etc. However, it was apparent that one person’s ‘special’ food, such as cheese, can be another person’s ‘every day’ food.

6.4 Trade offs

This study provides strong confirmation of consumers’ awareness of nutrient trade offs. This awareness was much more widespread than was first imagined, and was not limited to only the very health conscious consumers or those with special health needs. By far the majority of participants in this study were aware of nutrient trade offs, and have modified their label reading to accommodate them.

The most well recognised trade offs anticipated by consumers are for products that make a fat claim, which may be high in sugar or energy or salt; for products that make a sugar claim, which may be high in energy; and for products that make a salt claim but are high in sugar.

There was also a recognition that the trade off may result in a product being lower than 'normal' in the claimed nutrient, but consequently higher than 'normal' in the trade off nutrient. Whilst some inquirers were capable of searching for and distinguishing between trade offs of some magnitude (ie two products that differed markedly in a trade off nutrient), it is suspected by the researchers that they, as well as most other consumers in the study, would struggle to assess the relative importance of nutrient differences and make the wisest choice for a healthy diet. In several cases participants admitted this themselves, disclosing a lack of confidence in deciding which was the best product choice, once significant differences had been observed in more than one nutrient. Whilst it was not the purpose of this research to investigate consumers' capacity to evaluate the nutritional value of two products, using the NIP, the previous quantitative research⁵ has indicated that many consumers are not very good at assessing relative differences between nutrients.

Participants approach trade offs differently

Some participants look for trade-offs based on their significant nutrient first – ie if their 'significant' nutrient is fat, yet they have been drawn to a product because of a salt claim, they usually resolve their choice based on fat. Others will initially select a product based on the fat claim, and then look at content of other important nutrients, such as salt or sugar.

There was no indication that manufacturers' nutrition content claims are misleading consumers in this study when it comes to trade offs. Often products with nutrition content claims are put back on the shelf after the trade off has been investigated, because the trade off nutrient, even though it is not the most 'significant' nutrient for a consumer, is unacceptably high. Consumers report that they are usually able to find a product that offers sufficiently low or high amounts of their significant nutrient, without compromising on unacceptably low or high amounts of another significant nutrient.

6.5 The credibility of nutrition content claims

Consumers hold several beliefs about the credibility of nutrition content claims, which are not mutually exclusive.

There is an underlying level of scepticism and cynicism about nutrition content claims and the intention of manufacturers in using them. Most consumers, therefore, assume that nutrition content claims should not be trusted, implicitly, and that manufacturers are using such claims to persuade them to buy a product, rather than simply inform them about the product. We have reported earlier the clear distinction that consumers across the board make between information on the front of the pack (advertising) and on the back of the pack (fact or truth).

⁵ *Food Labelling Issues: Quantitative Research with Consumers. FSANZ Evaluation Report Series No 4*

Many consumers referred to particular nutrition content claims, on particular products as 'misleading'. Many participants in all groups spontaneously and frequently used this particular term. Some, but not the majority, of these participants also subscribe to a more general belief that all claims are 'misleading'. However most consumers are also able to discern the difference between a claim being misleading and untruthful. Very few participants perceived that a manufacturer was lying or being dishonest in their claim.

Most consumers do not believe that they are being misled by manufacturers, and often pride themselves on their ability to see through a nutrition content claim and make their own assessment of the nutritional value of a food. Their knowledge and reported behaviour regarding their use of the NIP and the ingredients list suggests that, in spite of feeling that nutrition content claims can be misleading (for others), they are quite capable of looking out for nutrient trade offs.

The concern of these consumers is vested in 'other' shoppers, whom they assume are less knowledgeable or able than themselves, and may well be misled into buying products for one nutritional benefit, unaware that it has another nutritional trade off.

"there's a lot of people...we're talking about educated people, we've obviously all been educated and we can read and understand these labels and everything that's in them, but there's a lot of people out there that are illiterate and they see a label like that, lite, and they think "this is good and healthy for me" and they pick it up and they take it, they don't understand"

[Aust, lower SES, moderately health conscious, 45-64yrs]

It is speculated that the 'misleading' that concerned consumers refer to may well be occurring on an ad hoc basis amongst infrequent shoppers, or those who generally do not care about the health content of the foods they eat, but are now and then spontaneously persuaded by nutrition content claims.

6.6 Are there too many nutrition content claims?

There were two views about the number of nutrition content claims, and more broadly speaking information on food labels. A small proportion of participants felt that product labels are too congested and that there are too many versions of 'standard' foods these days. These consumers harp back to the 'old days' when there were only one or two versions of each food, and when it was easy to find the 'plain' one.

However, the majority of participants in this study support the use of nutrition content claims, as long as they are accompanied by a NIP on the back. Most consumers would rather have more rather than less information, but many would like to see what they term 'standardisation' of nutrition information on packages.

"I like to have a fair bit of information on labels"

"if we get too many terms, we won't look at anything"

"Got to be standardised guidelines, they should not be able to make up words that don't mean anything"

7 FAMILIARITY WITH AND USE OF NUTRITION CONTENT CLAIMS

Consumers' awareness and use of nutrition content claims was assessed in three ways:

- Spontaneous (unprompted) recall: via a written task at the commencement of the group;
- Prompted recall of eight different categories of nutrition content claims: via a second written task prior to the influence of the group discussion; and
- Structured questioning and free-flowing group discussion.

This section deals with the written task findings. Following sections report in more detail on familiarity and use of specific nutrition content claims.

7.1 Familiarity with Nutrition Content Claims

The nutrition content claims most 'top of mind', as demonstrated by spontaneous (unprompted) recall, were (in order of mention):

- Low (calories/kilojoules/fat/in cholesterol/salt/sugar/in carbohydrates)
- % fat free;
- High in (fibre/calcium/iron/vitamins/minerals);
- No added (sugar/salt/preservatives/artificial colourings and flavourings/fat);
- Free (dairy free/fat free/gluten free/cholesterol free/lactose free);
- Reduced (cholesterol reduced/reduced fat/salt reduced); and
- Lite/Light

Of the 'low' type nutrition content claims, 'low fat' was most commonly mentioned. 'Low' claims were associated with dairy products, followed by confectionary, meat products, spreads/sauces and margarine/butter. This was the most frequently recalled type of nutrition content claim amongst Australian consumers (but not New Zealanders).

Of the '% fat free' claims mentioned, '98% fat free' was the most common response. Dairy products were again most commonly associated with this type of claim, followed by crackers, replacement meals, spreads/sauces and chips.

'High in fibre' was the most frequently mentioned 'high' claim, associated with breakfast foods such as cereals, muesli, bran and bread, and dairy products.

The 'no added' and 'free' claim categories were recalled equally. 'No added sugar' was the most frequently recalled 'no added' claim, mentioned for drinks and juices and tinned foods and soups. 'Cholesterol free' and 'no cholesterol' were the most frequently recalled 'free' claims, mentioned mostly for margarine/butter, followed by confectionary, drinks/juices, dairy, spreads/sauces and tinned food and soups.

'Fat reduced' was the most commonly referred to 'reduced' claim, followed by 'salt reduced'. These claims were most frequently associated with dairy products, followed by margarine/butter and tinned foods and soups.

'Lite/light' claims were mainly associated with dairy products, margarine/butter and spreads/sauces.

New Zealanders recorded a wider range of one-off 'other' types of claims such as glycaemic index, organic, the NHF tick, no MSG, 100% natural, added vitamins and many others.

After being asked to record their top of mind awareness of nutrition content claims, the group was shown a set of boards displaying the eight different types of nutrition content claims of interest to this study (see Section 5). As each claim type was shown to them, they were asked to rate on a written sheet whether they had seen the claim, and to what extent they had used the claim, if at all. This exercise provides an indication of prompted recognition and use.

Each of the eight types of nutrition content claims were familiar to most participants. Almost all reported that they had 'definitely' seen each type of claim except carbohydrate and protein claims, about which a greater proportion of participants were unsure.

7.2 Use of nutrition content claims

The most frequently used types of nutrition content claims were

- % fat free
- Free
- Comparative claims
- No added
- Lite/light

Carbohydrate and protein' claims, cholesterol claims and 'diet' claims were reported as having less frequent use. 'Diet' claims were the least frequently used, with a quarter of participants reporting that they had never used this type of claim. New Zealand consumers, compared to Australians, used 'diet' substantially less frequently.

The use of specific nutrition content claims is discussed in sections 8 to 15.

7.3 Trust felt towards nutrition content claims

The last component of the second written task asked participants to rate on a scale of 1 to 10 the extent to which they felt they could trust each type of claim. (1 = definitely trust and 10 = definitely do not trust)

The types of claims that were deemed most trustworthy were cholesterol, ‘% fat free’, and ‘no added’ claims. Cholesterol claims were trusted the most, and many more New Zealand participants rated this type of claim as trustworthy, compared to Australians.

Participants were less sure about whether they could trust comparative claims (New Zealanders being less sure), ‘free’ claims (New Zealanders trusting these claims more than Australians), carbohydrate and protein claims, and ‘lite/light’ claims.

The least trusted claim was ‘diet’, with one fifth of participants reporting that they “definitely do not trust” this type of claim. This result was strongly influenced by New Zealanders who rated ‘diet’ as far less trustworthy than did Australians.



8 COMPARATIVE CLAIMS

8.1 Background and context

Comparative nutrition content claims are those claims that compare a food with a similar food or class of foods such as 'reduced', 'increased' and 'less than'.

Participants used the moderator's showcard and real product examples as references during the discussion, as well as examples they recalled from their own experiences.

Key finding: Participants were highly familiar with the various comparative claims included in this study. More than any other type of nutrition content claim, comparative claims were described by consumers as 'just a guide', and required verification by using the NIP because the comparative claim terms were regarded as too generic to be useful in their own right. Comparative claims did imply that the product was healthier than the 'original', but not necessarily healthy or a better choice. There was a high level of scepticism about these terms in all groups, and a great deal of confusion between these and the other terms. 'Reduced' was understood to mean lower than the 'normal' version. Generally consumers were more sceptical about this term than 'low', but found it difficult to distinguish between them. The claim 'increased' was less familiar to consumers, because it is usually associated with nutrients of less significance to them. Consumers were much less sceptical about 'increased' claims, as they were about a 'less than' claim, as long as it is used in a quantified context. Quantified 'less than' claims were preferred as they were regarded as far less ambiguous or confusing.

8.2 Familiarity with comparative claims

Consumers in this research were highly familiar with the various comparative claims included in this study. Everyone in every group recognised each of the examples and most had selected products at least partly based on a comparative claim. For most consumers use of comparative claims, as with most nutrition content claims, is not usually pre-meditated. Whilst consumers who are highly health conscious or shopping for special health needs are deliberately attentive to nutrition content claims, for most their use of them is spontaneous and ad hoc.

On the whole, 'reduced' claims were associated with sugar, salt and fat, 'increased' claims were most commonly associated with calcium, and 'low' claims were linked to fat and salt.

8.3 Use of comparative claims

More than any other type of nutrition content claim, comparative claims were described by consumers as 'just a guide', and required verification by using the NIP because the comparative claim terms were regarded as too generic to be useful in their own right. The process of verification was described by consumers as 'getting more information' and involved one or a more of the following:

- either finding out exactly how much of the nutrient in question was present in the product (using the NIP as a stand alone tool);
- comparing the product's NIP with the NIP of another 'original' product that made no such claim (how much lower is low);
- comparing the product's NIP with the NIP of another product that makes the same claim (is this 'low' as low as 'that' low?).

Consumers were more likely to use these claims in the third way, described above, if they were very interested in nutrition, or were highly health conscious.

8.4 Comparisons with reference foods

In this regard, many consumers are looking to make comparisons with a reference food, and many struggle to find the most appropriate reference food. For some, the most appropriate reference product is a similar product by another brand, for others it is another product in the same range.

Most consumers could not recall having noticed any labelling that provides a comparison to the reference food, either via an extra column in the NIP, or a statement on the label which compares to the reference foods, such as '30% reduced fat when compared to [brand] tasty cheese' and 'contains less than half the fat and 20% more protein than standard full cream milk'. There were no available examples of the NIP column for reference foods; however when the reference food statement was brought to their attention, using a 'reduced fat' milk example, many participants felt this information was useful and valuable, and it was viewed as being quicker by those participants who did not wish to invest a lot of time reading NIPs. On balance however, amongst those interested in making comparisons, the 'standard' NIP was still regarded as more helpful and, for some, more believable for making comparisons between a 'reduced' product (eg milk) and a reference product (eg full fat milk) because one could hold the two NIPs side by side and directly compare the values in each NIP.

Often the process of verification is also one of self-education and inquirers use claims and NIPs to teach themselves and make decisions about products that are acceptable to them. Once the claim is verified, and the product is 'tried and proven' based on its nutritional value, taste and price, the claim is then used to quickly identify the same product again for a repeat purchase. Yogurts, cereals and canned foods were common product examples.

However, some resent having to further investigate the claim, as illustrated by the following conversation between a number of participants.

"when they are not being specific on what the difference is why not have it on the front of the packaging that it is 10% reduced, why do I sort of have to turn to the back?" [NZ, lower SES, special health needs, 25-44yrs]

Moderator: “How do you feel about having to do that?”

Participants:

“annoyed. You should be able to just see it. It should say, like you said, it should just be there”

“stamped on the front”

“so you don’t have to turn it around and stand there for half an hour looking at each one”

“the printed matter is probably boring to the manufacturer they would probably rather have it pretty on the front where we want just the words on the front” [NZ, lower SES, special health needs, 25-44yrs]

More attention is paid to, and involvement invested in, comparative claims that refer to a consumer’s significant nutrient. If the claim is made about a nutrient other than the significant nutrient, or one that is lower down on their list of significant nutrients, the product may well still be noticed and examined initially in response to the claim, but will be assessed primarily on the significant nutrient rather than the claimed nutrient. In this context, inquirers begin to look for and assess nutrient trade-offs, and are not led by the claim alone. For example, a consumer who is unconsciously or consciously most influenced by fat content may well notice a ‘low salt’ claim on a product, pick up that product for its suggested health benefit, but from there on make a decision to purchase based on fat rather than salt content.

8.5 Understanding of comparative claims

Each of the three comparative claim terms was discussed in turn and then in the context of other claims using the terms ‘low’, ‘high’, ‘lite’ and ‘diet’.

The perception amongst most participants, in all groups, was that a comparative claim implied that the product was healthier than the ‘original’, but not necessarily healthy or a better choice. There was a high level of scepticism about these terms in all groups, and a great deal of confusion between these and the other terms. Most were not able to reach agreement as to whether a product was a healthy choice if it carried a comparative claim. At the root of consumers confusion is their search for a health recommendation rather than reference to a reference food.

“they might make you think subconsciously that they are healthy for you. You just don’t know, is it reduced within the healthy guidelines?” [Aust, low SES, highly health conscious, 24-44yrs]

'Reduced'

'Reduced' was generally understood to mean lower than the regular or 'original' version.

Generally consumers were more sceptical about this term than 'low', but found it difficult to distinguish between the two terms. There was no understanding that the use of this term was regulated with maximum content conditions, and that there were therefore 'boundaries' around the use of the 'reduced' claim. Many participants were dissatisfied with the degree of ambiguity around this term, and felt that it was difficult or impossible to know how much the product had been reduced by unless it stated the % reduction as part of the claim.

"I wonder what it is reduced in comparison to. Is it less than previously? Or less than the tin next to it?" [Aust, low SES, highly health conscious, 24-44yrs]

"well someone's 'reduced' may not be half as much reduced as someone else's...you could have ten brands that all say reduced, but they could be reduced to ten different extents". [Aust, lower SES, moderately health conscious, 45-64yrs]

The obvious confusion over how the term 'reduced' differs to a 'low' claim confirms the findings of the previous quantitative research⁶, where nearly half of the consumers interviewed (46%) said that the 'reduced in salt' term meant that the food contains less salt compared to a similar food labelled 'low salt', and a further 26% said that the term meant that the food contains the same amount of salt. Only 11% said that the 'reduced in salt' term meant that the food contains more salt compared to a similar food labelled 'low salt' (the correct response).

There was a clear preference for '% reduced' claims (on the front of the package) compared to general 'reduced' claims, accompanied by the reference statement on the back of the package. '% reduced' claims were useful to consumers wanting to lower their intake of a particular nutrient in order to make a healthier choice, many of whom felt that they did not need to know how much of the nutrient remained in the product, or did not know how to find out.

However more active inquirers preferred even more information, so that the claim would say 'reduced from X% to Y%'.

"I am a little cynical about the claims but I still notice them"

Moderator – *"what is the cynicism about?"*

"well you can reduce something from 80% to 75% fat and that is still reduced so I kind of want to know more" [NZ, upper SES, highly & moderately health conscious, 45-64 yrs]

⁶ *Food Labelling Issues: Quantitative Research with Consumers. FSANZ Evaluation Report Series No 4*

“It is a claim that makes you quickly scan the shelves and you might see ‘reduced’ and that will be okay to buy it but in actual fact when you think about it, it’s not actually saying anything is it”

Moderator – *“How come it is not telling us anything?”*

“because it is not quantifying”

“and it is not saying what it is comparing it with” [NZ, upper SES, highly & moderately health conscious, 45-64 yrs]

These consumers were capable of using the NIP to ascertain exactly how much of the nutrient was present, but had developed their capacity to do this because they found the current claims unhelpful.

Amongst some, there was an expectation that in order to reduce a nutrient, something else has been added to replace it, which then makes the product undesirable. These products were perceived to have been ‘altered’ and to now have increased preservatives, ‘nasty chemicals’, or ‘added stuff’ in order to address the taste imbalance of lowering or removing the claimed nutrient. These concerns applied as much to ‘low’ and ‘free’ claims as they did to ‘reduced’ claims.

“I worry about what they’ve replaced it with. I think it would be artificial, your sweeteners and things” [NZ, lower SES, special health needs, 25-44yrs]

“you trust that they are taking sugar out, and fat out, but you don’t trust what they are putting in it” [Aust, low SES, highly health conscious, 24-44yrs]

‘Increased’

Generally consumers were less familiar with the term ‘increased’, associating it with micronutrients such as calcium, protein, iron, and fibre. This claim was less salient and less important to consumers because they were associated with nutrients much further down on their list of ‘significant’ nutrients. This claim was deemed relevant to shoppers who had special health needs, or young children at risk of particular nutrient deficiencies.

The term was interpreted to mean ‘added’ or ‘enriched’ and, unlike ‘reduced’ and ‘low’ claims, it was generally understood that the food was not intrinsically (or ‘naturally’) high in the increased nutrient when it carried an ‘increased’ claim.

‘Increased’ claims carried none of the negative connotations associated with ‘reduced’ claims with regards to product alteration and the addition of other substances in order to compensate for poor taste.

Consumers were less sceptical, and less opinionated generally, about the ‘increased’ claim, mainly because of an underlying assumption that manufacturers would not want to increase something unless it made the product a better choice, or because it was of less interest to them.

Participants were less inclined to comment on the healthiness of a product carrying an 'increased' claim, because healthiness was viewed as being, primarily, to do with the fat, sugar or salt content of a food and the 'increased' claim was never used in association with these nutrients.

'Less than'

Consumers were also much less sceptical of 'less than' claims, when they were used in a quantified context, such as 'less than 5 g of sugar'. For some, the quantification negated the need to refer to the NIP, especially when the claim involved a consumer's significant nutrient.

A quantified 'less than' claim elicited much less scepticism and cynicism than 'reduced' claims because they were regarded as far less ambiguous or confusing.

8.6 Distinguishing between comparative claims and other claims

After the three comparative claim terms had been discussed independently, consumers were asked how they differed or compared to other nutrition content claims such as 'low' and 'high', 'lite' and 'diet'. To generate discussion, participants as a group, completed a word sort task where they were asked to differentiate the claims according to the amount of an example nutrient they contained. Fat, and sometimes also salt and sugar were used as the examples.

As reported earlier, consumers across all groups had difficulty distinguishing between the terms 'reduced' and 'low', and many also were confused as to how 'less than' (unquantified) and 'lite' differed from these terms. No group could reach 100% agreement about which of these terms would contain the most or least of an example nutrient. In most groups, the exercise appeared to increase consumers' confusion and frustration with the terms. Generally consumers agreed that it was difficult to make judgements about the terms without referring to the NIP. Some became quite frustrated with the task as they felt it was an impossible task.

"words don't mean anything until you look at the panel" [Aust, lower SES, moderately health conscious, 45-64yrs]

Some specific findings are reported below.

Low

In the general unstructured discussion, the term 'low' was used by participants interchangeably with 'reduced', and initially most perceived these terms to mean the same thing. Only after more focused discussion and the word sort exercise, did most groups agree that 'low' probably inferred more of a reduction than 'reduced'.

As with the 'reduced' claim, many participants did not feel that the presence of a 'low' claim made the product a better choice, or that it was the lowest version or brand

available. Most were familiar with having to use the NIP to compare with another product in order to ascertain the best choice for them.

“but you always compare it with the subject next to it. Like if it’s low fat cheese, you pick it up and look at that one and then you look at the other one and often it is actually higher in some cases” [NZ, upper SES, highly & moderately health conscious, 45-64 yrs]

In a couple of groups participants sought clarity about whether ‘low’ meant that the product was ‘naturally’ (intrinsically) low in the claimed nutrient, or if it meant it was now low because it had been reduced in that nutrient. This distinction then became a suggested point of differentiation between the ‘low’ and ‘reduced’ claims. . That is, for many people ‘low’ claims relate to products intrinsically low in the claimed nutrient, while ‘reduced’ products are ones that have been altered to contain lower amounts of the claimed nutrient.

The majority of consumers also recognised that a manufacturer’s use of a ‘low’ or ‘reduced’ claim was voluntary, and therefore one product carrying a ‘low’ (or ‘reduced’) claim could still be higher in the claimed nutrient than another product not labelled with a ‘low’ claim. For this reason the usefulness of these claims was regarded as fairly limited.

‘Lite’ and ‘Diet’ vs ‘increased’ and ‘low’

Consumers were also very familiar with ‘lite’ and ‘diet’ claims, and reactions to them are discussed in detail in sections 14 and 15. In comparison to the other claims, consumers across all groups were most cynical about the ‘lite’ claim. There was a high level of awareness that ‘lite’ could refer to many different things (a nutrient, colour, texture etc). ‘Lite’ was considered to be the most misleading of all claims. As well, many consumers, particularly those in the 45+ age groups strongly objected to the spelling of the word ‘lite’ and reported that they deliberately avoided buying products that carried the claim.

There was therefore much disagreement, within and across groups, as to how ‘lite’ and ‘diet’ differed from ‘low’, ‘reduced’ and ‘less than’. Most could not suggest how the terms could be distinguished from each other. Whilst some participants felt the terms inferred that they contained the least amount of a nutrient (compared to other terms such as ‘low’ and ‘reduced’ and ‘less than’), others felt as strongly that it could contain the same amount or more, and others again felt there was no way of knowing. Whilst the terms ‘lite’ and ‘diet’ are not classified as comparative terms, most consumers felt that the only way of correctly interpreting these claims would be to compare with another product that did not carry the claim.

High vs increased

Consumers initially found it difficult to distinguish between these terms, and until the focus group discussion had not given this comparison any thought. Once again they used the terms interchangeably. When pressed on this issue by the Moderator it was assumed that a food labelled with a 'high' claim (eg high in fibre) would probably contain more of the nutrient compared to a product labelled 'increased' (eg 'increased in fibre'); however consumers had no confidence that their assumption was correct. The discussion also raised the question as to whether 'high' meant 'naturally' high or whether it also included foods that had added fibre, whereas 'increased' clearly inferred that fibre had been added to the product during manufacturing.

8.7 Relative differences compared to the reference food

Consumers were quite adamant that products carrying any of the claims discussed earlier should differ significantly from their 'regular' counterparts. There was strong agreement that reductions in particular, but additions as well, of only small amounts should not be permitted under these claims. However most did not believe that this was currently the case, indeed many participants felt that that products currently claiming 'reduced' or 'low' could in fact be only reduced by quite tiny amounts.

"Technically they could (reduce it) by anything, by point one.

Moderator: *Do you think that happens?*

"Yes, I think it happens all the time."

The acceptable relative difference between a food carrying a comparative claim and the reference food varied between participants; however there was most agreement for a difference of about 25% or one quarter less or more than the 'regular' food. Differences of less than 10% were deemed unacceptable.

8.8 Trust and credibility of comparative claims

Compared to some other nutrition content claims such as 'free' and '% free' and 'no added sugar', consumers were highly sceptical about comparative claims, particularly 'reduced'. They were not deemed to be trustworthy, where trust implies 'reliability'– very few consumers in this study felt that they would rely on a comparative claim when purchasing a product for the first time.

"I'd still read the label to see where it (the fat/salt/sugar) is coming from...I wouldn't trust them" [Aust, lower SES, moderately health conscious, 45-64yrs]

However, consumers did not regard these claims as unbelievable, where believable implies 'truth'. Most acknowledged that the claim 'reduced' truthfully implies that the product contains less of the claimed nutrient than its 'original' counterpart. However, these claims were viewed as providing incomplete information, which can then be misleading if taken at face value. Most of these claims were viewed as misleading

because of their perceived ambiguity, which is assumed to be deliberate on the part of manufacturers who are just trying to sell their product.

“I think it can be misleading sometimes too though because I mean I have seen it where people have real problems with weight issues so they tend to go for the low or the reduced because they think fat, but if they actually looked at the back they would see the carbohydrates have been shot right up, it is actually worse for them than if they had gone for the ordinary thing, so it can be misleading” [NZ, lower SES, special health needs, 25-44yrs]

“It is just trying to lure you to it that it is better than something else but you don't know what the something else is” [NZ, lower SES, special health needs, 25-44yrs]

“it is basically a sales point because if you actually had time to sit and compare one packet with the other you would probably find there is no difference anyhow” [NZ, lower SES, special health needs, 25-44yrs]

However, whilst most consumers in this study were concerned and even angry about the vagueness of these claims, there was no indication that they themselves were being misled by manufacturers. Most have learned to moderate their behaviour, by using the NIP, to make decisions about the value of comparative claims. Their concern over the misleading nature of these claims was for 'other' less able shoppers who were unable to use NIPs.

9 'FREE' CLAIMS

9.1 Background and context

Examples of 'free' claims include; for example 'fat free', 'sugar free', 'cholesterol free', 'gluten free'. After the pilot group the 'gluten free' and 'lactose free' claims were excluded from the scope of this study for two reasons: firstly because they have a public health and safety issue which other 'free' claims don't have; and secondly because in the pilot group their perceived importance overwhelmingly overshadowed discussion about other 'free' claims such as 'fat free', 'sugar free' and 'cholesterol free'. These claims are permitted under certain circumstances in the Code of Practice on *Nutrient Claims in Food Labels and in Advertisements* in Australia (see Appendix D). In contrast to gluten and lactose claims, trace amounts of the nutrient (e.g. 0.15g of fat per 100g of food for a 'fat free' claim) are allowed because they are nutritionally and physiologically insignificant.

Participants used the moderator's showcard and real product examples as references during the discussion, as well as examples they recalled from their own experiences.

Key findings: All consumers were familiar with these claims, which are being used more extensively by them. In comparison to comparative claims, 'free' claims are viewed much more favourably, because they are not making any sort of comparison to any other food, and are viewed as more helpful and more definite than claims like 'reduced' or 'low'. 'Free' claims are regarded as quicker and easier to use by less 'active' inquirers, believers and moderately health conscious shoppers, but just as many fully 'active' inquirers would seek to verify the claim using the NIP. Every group came to the unanimous decision that 'free' should mean 'zero', although some felt it was unlikely that this was how manufacturers used the term. There was also universal agreement that 'free' should be based on absolute absence and not nutritional insignificance. Views about 'free' also differed for fat compared to sugar. Whilst 'fat free' claims were viewed as more straightforward, some consumers were highly distrustful of 'sugar free' claims because it was felt that 'free' did not mean the product was free of other sweeteners or hidden types of sugar.

9.2 Familiarity with and use of 'free' claims

All consumers, in all groups were familiar with these claims, which are being used more extensively by them. They were most commonly recalled being on dairy foods and breakfast cereals, and to a much lesser extent salad dressings, confectionary, jars of salsa, and fresh produce such as kiwi fruit and avocados.

In comparison to comparative claims, 'free' claims were viewed much more favourably, because they are not making any sort of comparison to any other food, and were viewed as more helpful and more definite than claims like 'reduced' or 'low', and therefore less confusing or misleading.

“This was the one I trusted the most, because if it says that it is not comparing itself with something else. It is not ‘a little bit better’ or what ever.” [Aust., Upper SES, moderately health conscious, 25-44yrs]

“I would buy fat free and sugar free against ‘reduced’ because I haven’t got time to read all the labels on the end and to me I would have to say that free is better than reduced.” [Aust, lower SES, moderately health conscious, 45-64yrs]

When confronted with a ‘free’ claim on a product they haven’t seen or bought before, most consumers felt that they would be initially attracted to the product and inclined to pick it up. ‘Free’ claims were regarded as quicker and easier to use, particularly for only moderately health conscious and those who are less ‘active’ inquirers. These consumers wanted to be able to use a ‘free’ claim without having to use the NIP as well.

“I want to believe that [points to fat free claim] has no fat in it and that [point to sugar free claim] has not sugar in it ...and [other participant’s name] was saying that should read the packet but I think there is no need, because that to me says something.” [Aust, lower SES, moderately health conscious, 45-64yrs]

9.3 Using the NIP for verification

There were, however, just as many consumers who sought to verify the claim as there were consumers like those discussed above, who took a ‘free’ claim at face value. Verification was done by using the NIP to compare the amount of the claimed nutrient with another product that does not make the same claim, or by looking for nutrient trade-offs. Those who verify the claim were more likely to be highly health conscious consumers, those with special needs and/or ‘active’ inquirers. These consumers were more sceptical of ‘free’ claims and actively looked for nutrient trade offs, such as high amounts of sugar or carbohydrate on products such as yogurt and lollies that carry ‘fat free’ claims. In a typical group, half the participants would investigate and verify ‘free’ claims in this way, another quarter would have some suspicion of a trade off but would not have investigated, and the remaining one or two participants would have trusted the claim without further thought or investigation.

The following conversation was highly typical of consumers’ reaction when the moderator introduced a confectionary product, in this case marshmallows, carrying a ‘fat free’ claim.

Moderator *“why are we laughing?”*

“because of the sugar in there. I would look in there and see if it was saccharin or sucryl or something that was a replacement and then I would buy it if it was”

Moderator *“how do we feel about them putting fat free on things which are high in sugar like that one?”*

“one of those roll your eye things”

Moderator – *“what does that mean?”*

“the whole thing is that that is not a fatty product and we all know that so we are not stupid and you are making it look good but come on!”

“well it wouldn’t make me think ‘oh it’s fat free I’ve got to buy it’, I would be quite sceptical about what is actually still in it”

“It is a ploy to try and get you to buy it, what are they hiding? People think they can eat that without guilt”. [NZ, lower SES, special health needs, 25-44yrs]

9.4 Understanding of ‘free’ claims

Across and within all groups there were only slightly varied reactions to what ‘free’ meant:

Nothing, not a trace

Nothing added

Nil

None whatsoever

Zero

Absolutely none

Free should always mean zero

Every group came to the unanimous and unequivocal decision that ‘free’ should mean ‘zero’ or ‘nothing, not a trace’, although many felt it was unlikely that this was how the term was used by manufacturers. Those who were more sceptical had seen evidence to support this on NIP labels in the past. Others, who had trusted implicitly that ‘free’ = zero, were surprised and disappointed to hear that the ‘free’ term has been used for products that contain small amounts of the claimed substance.

“free says nothing, there’s no sugar and there’s no fat” [Aust, lower SES, moderately health conscious, 45-64yrs]

Their views about the ‘correct’ definition of ‘free’ were based on their literal interpretation of the word, as well as their awareness that this claim is also used for substances that are potentially harmful to some consumers, such as wheat/gluten, peanuts and sugars (lactose).

'Sugar free' is more ambiguous

Views about 'free' also differed for fat compared to sugar. Whilst 'fat free' claims were viewed as more straightforward, some consumers were highly distrustful of 'sugar free' claims because it was felt that 'free' did not mean the product was free of other sweeteners or hidden types of sugar. This view was based on participants' recollections of having used the NIP to verify the claim and having found the product to contain an amount of sugar, and other experiences of having referred to the ingredients list in their verification process, such as the example described below.

“sugar can be many other ingredients, it can be sucrose, fructose, sugar itself, so if you're saying it's sugar free, yes it's got no sugar but lo and behold it's got fructose, sucrose and what ever, which is still sugar...this states categorically sugar free, so I wouldn't expect to find any of that”
[Aust, lower SES, moderately health conscious, 45-64yrs]

By contrast, no one in the study raised similar concerns about types of fat, and it was assumed that 'fat free' meant the product was free of all types of fat.

Insignificant amounts of nutrients are significant!

When the issue of nutritional 'insignificance' was introduced into the discussion, most participants accepted that for nutrients such as fat, sugar and cholesterol, small amounts such as 0.01g or 0.05g were virtually insignificant and certainly not harmful. Whilst a couple of participants in each group felt that leaving small amounts in a 'free' product was a result of the manufacturer being lazy or untruthful, by far the majority acknowledged that it was very difficult for manufacturers to remove 100% of the nutrient and that trace amounts left in the product was probably unintentional on the part of the manufacturer.

Nonetheless, there was universal agreement that the use of the 'free' claim should be based on absolute absence and not nutritional insignificance. Similarly, the use of different definitions of 'free' for nutrients such as fat and sugar compared to substances that can have harmful effects, such as gluten and lactose was viewed as unacceptable. It was consistently advocated by participants that manufacturers shouldn't be able to claim 'free' unless they could guarantee it was free, and that they should be made to use another term or claim, such as using a percentage, if they wished to indicate very small amounts.

However, rather than favouring a new alternative word or statement to indicate trace amounts, such as 'very low', 'traces of', 'minimal amount of', 'virtually nil' etc consumers preferred that the exact amount be included in the claim – such as 1% fat or 'less than 1% fat'. The alternate suggestions, such as 'traces of' were viewed as being more of an 'escape clause' or disclaimer than a claim, and were not favoured because they were felt to be too inexact, and therefore must be trying to hide something.

In most groups consumers were confused about whether a 'free' claim inferred that the absence of the nutrient was a result of it having been reduced in processing (such as yogurt) or whether the claim should also include products that have never contained the nutrient, eg fat in kiwi fruit, cholesterol in avocados, fat in marshmallows, and salsa. The inclusion of the latter products added to consumers' cynicism of the 'free' claim, particularly when it was used on fresh produce.

Only a small number of consumers in the whole study were aware that a manufacturer is required to declare the amount of the nutrient in the NIP when a 'free' claim is made; however all fully endorsed this requirement, including consumers who did not use NIPs. It was felt that such a requirement was both helpful and useful for consumers, but was probably also necessary for 'less reputable' manufacturers who would otherwise put 'free' claims on products that were not necessarily free. The more cynical participants thought that this had probably been happening anyway, and were surprised and pleased to learn of the declaration requirement for packaged foods. Inquirers did however acknowledge that for most 'free' claims they looked at, the quantified amount of the nutrient could now be found in the NIP and they made the comment that NIPs with the most 'significant' nutrients were becoming more widespread and on packaged foods.

Helpful or misleading?

There was a great deal of disagreement in most groups as to whether 'fat free' claims were helpful or confusing when they were placed on foods which have never contained the claimed nutrient, such as 'fat free' marshmallows or other confectionary items; and foods that were felt to have a substantial nutrient trade off, such as 'fat free' diet yogurt that they had assessed was higher in sugar than most other yogurts. In most groups a few participants took strong objection to claims being used in this way, because they felt it was misleading 'other' consumers into thinking they were buying a product that was healthier than it actually was. At this point in the discussion, one or two other participants in these groups admitted to using claims in this way, and a couple admitted to having inferred that 'free' claims meant that they could eat that food in virtually unlimited amounts.

The extent to which this claim was viewed as unhelpful or misleading depended on the product example. In the case of confectionary, some felt the claim was still useful as it helped to identify a 'better' choice in an 'unhealthy' or 'treat' food category. However in the yogurt example, where the product may be consumed more frequently as a 'staple' food, there was more widespread concern that people could be eating this food for its 'fat free' qualities, and be completely unaware that it is much higher in sugar than 'standard' yogurt.

10 '% FAT FREE' CLAIMS

10.1 Background and context

In the Draft Assessment Report for P234 (Criteria and conditions for making nutrition content and related claims), ANZFA (now FSANZ) recommended that '% fat free' be permitted if it meets the requirements for 'low fat' claims. Please refer to Appendix D for CoPoNC criteria related to this nutrition content claim.

The examples of '% fat free' claims used in this study were '100% fat free', '99% fat free', '98% fat free', '97% fat free', '96% fat free' and/or '94% fat free'. Participants used the moderator's showcard and real product examples as references during the discussion, as well as examples they recalled from their own experiences.

Key finding: All consumers were familiar with '% fat free' claims, which, like 'free' claims, are being used more extensively by them. Consumers felt even more positively towards these claims than they did about 'fat free' claims, because they were more definitive and therefore viewed as more reliable. The most commonly raised limitation of '% fat free' claims was that the claim does not immediately reveal how much fat is in the product. Very few consciously looked beyond the percentage to think about the amount of fat they would be consuming from the product. The majority of, but not all, participants felt that a percentage below 90% was misleading and should not be permitted. Disclaimers were not widely considered necessary or useful by inquirers.

10.2 Familiarity with and use of '% fat free' claims

All consumers, in all groups were familiar with these claims, which like 'free' claims, are being used more extensively by them. They were most commonly recalled being on yogurts, milks, frozen meals, salad dressings and rice crackers. Its wide use was particularly due to the fact that fat is the most commonly observed nutrient.

10.3 Attitudes towards and understanding of '% free' claims

Consumers in all groups felt positively towards '% fat free' claims, even more so than they did about 'fat free' claims, because they were more definitive and therefore viewed as more reliable.

"...like for me, if they give a percentage, that is measurable, very clear cut, quantifiable statement." [NZ, upper SES, highly & moderately health conscious, 45-64 yrs]

Generally participants felt that if a manufacturer was prepared to state a percentage of fat free there was less room for ambiguity because the company was required to be honest in this declaration. The majority of participants therefore felt that one was least likely to be misled by a '% fat free' claim, so it was consequently viewed as helpful and useful. Others felt that a percentage-based claim gave the product, and the manufacturer, more credibility.

“that one to me with the percentage is actually saying that they have done their homework and gone that extra step to actually finding out for you the consumer how much really is in there. So yeah, something that is saying that to me that they have gone that little bit further and they have made the effort to back themselves up” [NZ, lower SES, special health needs, 25-44yrs]

Another benefit of ‘% fat free’ claims was that they made comparison between products much easier than comparative claims.

Limitations and confusion

The most commonly raised limitation of ‘% fat free’ claims was that the claim does not immediately tell the consumer how much fat is in the product. Cynical consumers questioned why a manufacturer was telling them how much of a nutrient wasn’t there, instead of how much was, however most acknowledged the marketing advantage of a high ‘% fat free’ claim.

Only those most ‘active’ inquirers were making reverse calculations when they looked at a ‘% fat free’ claim, to ascertain the actual % fat of the product. Whilst many participants had broadly understood that 99% and 98% ‘fat free’ claims are lower in fat than 96% and 94% ‘fat free’ foods, only highly experienced or informed inquirers (one or two consumers in most groups) viewed a ‘94% fat free’ claim as having approximately twice as much fat as a ‘97% fat free’ claim.

In this way, most consumers were looking for high numbers in ‘% fat free’ claims, such as ‘99% fat free’; very few consciously looked beyond the percentage to think about the amount of fat they would be consuming from the product.

The researchers hypothesise that some, if not many, inquirers are overly confident about their ability to accurately verify a ‘% fat free’ claim in terms of its relative fat content. This hypothesis is partly informed by the findings in the previous quantitative research⁷, where three quarters of consumers (75%) said that the ‘94% fat free’ term meant that the food was a ‘low fat food’, where as only 16% correctly described it as a ‘medium fat food’ (as defined in the Code of Practice on *Nutrient Claims in Food Labels and in Advertisements*).

Some consumers were confused by or sceptical about ‘% fat free’ claims because they did not know or did not trust how the percentage fat is calculated.

“it doesn’t really matter whether it says 99 or 94, it still means that it is in there, there could still be heaps of fat, as you said, how do they work out that percentage, are they just going by how much is in that bottle of mayonnaise?” [NZ, lower SES, special health needs, 25-44yrs]

⁷ *Food Labelling Issues: Quantitative Research with Consumers. FSANZ Evaluation Report Series No 4*

Price / fat trade off

When choosing between ‘% fat free’ products, consumers were often making a price/’% fat free’ trade off, particularly between products that were perceived to be more closely fat free, such as those that are 94% or more fat free. For example if the ‘99% fat free’ product was a lot more expensive than the ‘97% fat free’ product, they would choose the ‘97% fat free’ version. However, if price was equal they would select the product that had less fat, no matter how much less it contained. In this regard, a product with a ‘99% fat free’ claim was deemed better than a product that was ‘94% fat free’.

10.4 Minimum standards for ‘% fat free’ claims?

Overall, participants were divided in their view about minimum amounts for ‘% fat free’ claims. Most had to think about the question for some time before they were able to offer a recommendation, demonstrating that this was not an issue that they had given any thought to previously, or that had concerned them in the past.

The majority of consumers felt that a ‘% fat free’ claim below 90% was misleading and should not be permitted. However about a third of participants, had no strong feeling that a minimum was necessary at all. These consumers regarded any percentage as a legitimate ‘% fat free’ claim as the percentage spoke for itself and they, as the shopper, could decide from the declared percentage if they wished to buy the product. For some of these participants, it was felt that there could be no appropriate minimum limit, as it would depend on the product’s initial or intrinsic fat content. It was suggested, for example, that some cheeses labelled ‘70% fat free’ may well be a useful claim for consumers, as it pointed out a healthier choice, where as ‘90% fat free’ on milk would not be viewed as a good choice relative to other milks.

Another suggestion was making the minimum standard an amount significantly lower than the reference food in that product range. This would mean that milk, for example, should not be able to carry a ‘96% fat free’ claim as ‘regular’ milk is normally 4% fat, but that 98% and 99% ‘fat free’ claims would be permissible in this case.

10.5 Views about disclaimers for ‘% fat free’ claims

The benefits of using a disclaimer such as ‘this is a low fat food’ in conjunction with a ‘% fat free’ claim were explored.

Whilst most consumers understood the intent behind such a disclaimer, and did not object to it, it wasn’t viewed as particularly necessary or useful by inquirers who already knew that a ‘% fat free’ claim did not always mean the product was low fat. In their view, most people are able to work out for themselves whether the product is low fat, by using the NIP to compare products.

At the root of this view was the assumption that the term ‘low fat’ is a relative and highly subjective term, that only makes sense in comparison with other foods which may be

'lower' or 'higher' in fat. There was no awareness that the term 'low fat' is defined around a regulated amount of fat. Therefore, for believers or less informed inquirers, a disclaimer statement was also of little use, because the term 'low fat' is not well understood.

Therefore for such a disclaimer to be useful, consumers would need to be firstly educated about its introduction and what the disclaimer actually means. Many consumers foreshadowed that unless they knew to look out for such a disclaimer, they probably would dismiss it as more manufacturer advertising, and would not assume that a food that did not carry a disclaimer was not a low fat food. As well, the researchers observed from the discussion that the format and size of the disclaimer would need to be strictly prescribed, otherwise it probably would not be noticed by consumers at all.



11 CHOLESTEROL CLAIMS

11.1 Background and context

Current scientific evidence suggests that greater emphasis should be placed on reducing the intake of saturated fats, rather than dietary cholesterol as a strategy to reduce coronary heart disease. ANZFA (now FSANZ) therefore proposed in the Draft Assessment Report for P234 that cholesterol claims ('low in cholesterol', 'reduced in cholesterol', 'cholesterol free') be prohibited, in order to avoid confusing consumers. This study therefore focuses on consumers' attitudes towards and their perceived usefulness of these claims. Please refer to Appendix D for CoPoNC criteria related to this nutrition content claim.

Participants used the moderator's showcard and real product examples as references during the discussion, as well as examples they recalled from their own experiences.

Key finding: Only consumers with a special interest in blood cholesterol or heart disease, or those in the upper age group 45-64yrs paid any attention to cholesterol claims. Amongst those consumers in the study that did have special health needs associated with blood cholesterol or heart disease, there was a high level of label-education and capacity to use the NIP to evaluate products. Most used the NIP to assess the amount of saturated fat in the product and based their product choice on this information. Consumers with medically diagnosed cholesterol conditions find fat claims, and saturated fat information in the NIP of more use than cholesterol claims. Amongst these participants, as well as those who are cholesterol-conscious, the only cholesterol claim that is deemed 'reliable' is 'cholesterol free'.

11.2 Familiarity with and use of cholesterol claims

Only consumers with a special interest in blood cholesterol or heart disease, or those in the upper age group 45-64yrs paid any attention to cholesterol claims. Whilst quite a few other participants were familiar with the various cholesterol claims, most dismissed or paid no attention to them whilst shopping. In the context of a consumer's 'significant nutrient(s)' cholesterol is very much a low or no-priority for most. This was particularly true for younger participants, who felt that watching one's dietary cholesterol was not important until much later in life. Amongst younger participants there was no obvious understanding of the difference between blood and dietary cholesterol.

Amongst those consumers in the study that did have special health needs associated with blood cholesterol or heart disease, there was a high level of label-education and capacity to use the NIP to evaluate products. Our study included people with newly diagnosed cholesterol-related conditions, as well as those who had been monitoring cholesterol for a number of years. Whilst all were familiar with cholesterol claims, very few based their product assessment and selection solely on these claims. Most used the NIP to assess the amount of saturated fat in the product and based their product choice on this information.

11.3 Understanding of cholesterol and coronary heart disease

Across all groups in which cholesterol claims were discussed, everyone understood that cholesterol in food was ‘bad for you’ and most participants had a vague awareness that blood cholesterol had something to do with fat. There was a general view that foods that are low in cholesterol are also low in fats.

The level of understanding about the difference between dietary and blood cholesterol, and the relative importance of blood cholesterol, fat and saturated fat in relation to coronary heart disease varied depending on a consumer’s information source. Those that had been advised to lower their cholesterol by a GP or dietitian were well informed, and familiar with the concepts of ‘good and bad fat’, and ‘good and bad cholesterol’. Saturated fats were regarded as the ‘bad’ fats, polyunsaturated and mono-unsaturated were ‘good’ fats, and a few of these participants had a sketchy knowledge that omega-3s were also ‘good’. They had clearly been informed about how dietary cholesterol impacts on blood cholesterol, and some referred to terms such as ‘HDL’ and ‘LDL’ or ‘the lowering cholesterol’ but no one was able to explain to the group exactly how it all worked.

Nonetheless, most of these consumers understood how to use the NIP to assess a product as a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ choice, and their assessment was usually determined based on the amount of saturated fat in the product. For these consumers, cholesterol claims, or amounts of cholesterol declared in the NIP were secondary, if not superfluous.

For the remainder of blood cholesterol-conscious consumers, their knowledge was much less accurate, and their reliance on cholesterol claims was greater. Some of these participants had a vague understanding of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ cholesterol, but not much more.

11.4 Attitudes towards and usefulness of cholesterol claims

Consumers with medically diagnosed cholesterol conditions found fat claims, and saturated fat information in the NIP of more use than cholesterol claims. Amongst these participants, as well as those who are cholesterol-conscious, the only cholesterol claim that was deemed ‘reliable’ is ‘cholesterol free’. ‘Reduced cholesterol’ and ‘low cholesterol’ claims were viewed as roughly the same thing, and just advertising, whereas a ‘cholesterol free’ claim was assumed to reliably indicate that the product contained no (zero) cholesterol.

A few participants were concerned that cholesterol claims give the consumer a false sense of security. They cited examples of people they know who have inferred from the claim that the product is now ‘healthy’ and can be consumed much more liberally.

“sometimes it leads you astray. I know my Dad has a cholesterol problem and Mum buys low cholesterol rah rah rah and you’ll see him, and he’ll use

twice as much cause it's healthy for him...sometimes I wonder if it's giving people that false safety net." [Aust, low SES, highly health conscious, 24-44yrs]

The range of cholesterol claims could be reduced, if not removed entirely

When it was suggested to participants that fat and saturated fat information might be more useful than cholesterol claims, there was a strong but mixed reaction.

Those with diagnosed cholesterol and heart disease conditions agreed, and confirmed again that they already pay limited attention to cholesterol claims, and base their decisions on the saturated fat information in the NIP. For this group of consumers, the removal of cholesterol claims would not matter, although they felt it would be advisable to inform the medical and dietetic professions, who advise consumers on how to read labels, if such a change was introduced.

Those who are regular or infrequent dietary cholesterol 'watchers' did not support the removal of cholesterol claims. These consumers tended to rely more heavily on such claims, and did not understand the importance of saturated fat, rather than dietary cholesterol, in preventing heart disease. However, these consumers still found the range of cholesterol claims confusing, and did not know how to distinguish between 'reduced cholesterol', 'low cholesterol' and 'cholesterol free' claims. For this group of consumers, one claim only would be preferable, and the 'cholesterol free' claim was deemed most useful.

There is a smaller group of consumers who would be frustrated and confused by the carte blanche removal of cholesterol claims, as it would be interpreted as yet another change of mind about what is and isn't good and bad for you. These people felt that nutrition information and dietary recommendations are changing constantly, and were exhausted and angered by having to always keep up with new label information and health regulations. These people repeatedly drew on the butter/margarine debate as an example, as well as 'cholesterol free' claims on avocados.

Others again, who were not cholesterol 'watchers' themselves, were concerned that the removal of cholesterol claims would disadvantage those who did monitor their cholesterol intake. People who did not use cholesterol claims themselves nonetheless assumed that these claims are important to others, and afford a great deal of trust to them.

12 CARBOHYDRATE AND PROTEIN CLAIMS

The examples for carbohydrate and protein claims used in this study were the terms 'high in', 'low in' and 'source of'. Please refer to Appendix D for CoPoNC criteria related to this nutrition content claim. Participants used the moderator's showcard and real product examples as references during the discussion, as well as examples they recalled from their own experiences.

Key finding: Most participants paid little attention to carbohydrate and protein claims, and did not see foods carrying these claims as being of interest to them.

Most participants had very little to say about carbohydrate and protein claims. Only a few consumers in most groups were familiar with these claims, and very few were actively looking for them, or buying products that carried these claims. Awareness of protein claims was higher than that of carbohydrate claims.

Although carbohydrate and protein claims were not viewed as the same thing, both were associated with sports and energy drinks and powders. They were considered only relevant or applicable for people who had significantly greater energy or body weight needs, such as athletes and body builders.

A couple of participants, in different groups, reported having bought protein powder products for themselves or their teenage children, because they felt they were under weight. Most however either ignored these claims, or avoided them because they felt they should be getting adequate protein and carbohydrate from their diet. There was no interest, across the groups, for foods that made specific claims in either of these nutrients.

There was an indication, based on the comments of one or two participants in a couple of groups, that an increase in carbohydrate claims would result in consumers, and particularly parents, paying more attention to the sugar information in the NIP. These consumers made an assumption that energy drinks and other high carbohydrate foods could also be high in sugar, and they would therefore be inclined to assess the NIP to ascertain what proportion of total carbohydrates were made up of sugar.

13 'NO ADDED' CLAIMS

13.1 Background and context

Consumer groups have expressed concern about consumer confusion with 'no added sugar(s)', 'unsweetened' and 'no added salt/sodium' claims. ANZFA (now FSANZ) recommended in the Draft Assessment Report for P234 that a disclaimer should be placed on the label in conjunction with the claims to draw attention to the natural sugar or salt/sodium content of the product. Please refer to Appendix D for CoPoNC criteria related to this nutrition content claim.

Participants used the moderator's showcard and real product examples as references during the discussion, as well as examples they recalled from their own experiences.

Key finding: The 'no added sugar' claim was the most familiar of the three claims. The meaning of 'no added' was unequivocally understood to mean that the product had only 'natural' sugar or salt, with nothing added. It was also widely understood that 'no added' claims did not imply that the product had 'none' of the nutrient in question. It was also clear that 'unsweetened' meant the product had no artificial sweeteners, as well as no added sugar. Consumers were far less sceptical of 'no added' claims than most other claims, and use of the NIP to verify 'no added' claims was therefore less necessary. Inquirers and those with special health needs felt that disclaimers were unnecessary, as they already use the NIP as needed. Others however responded positively to the disclaimer 'contains natural salt/sugar' because it removed the ambiguity by clarifying whether the product was sugar or salt 'free'.

13.2 Familiarity with and use of 'no added' claims

'No added sugar' and 'unsweetened' claims were looked for on canned fruit, juices and cordial. 'No added sodium/salt' claims (referred to as 'no added salt') were sought on chips, baked beans, and canned vegetables.

Everyone was familiar with all three types of claims, however the 'no added sugar' claim was the most regularly looked for. The 'unsweetened' claim was sometimes distinguished as being taste-related (a less sweet taste) rather than nutrient-related, and as such, was looked for on foods that were to be used as ingredients in meal preparation where the desire for a less sweet or sweeter flavour was driving the choice of product.

13.3 Understanding and credibility of 'no added' claims

In all but one group the meaning of 'no added' was unequivocally understood to mean that the product had only 'natural' sugar or salt, with nothing added.

"whatever is there is there, but they haven't actually added anything" [Aust, lower SES, special health needs, 45-64yrs]

This was seen to be analogous with 'natural juice'.

It was also widely understood amongst consumers in this study that 'no added' claims did not imply that the product had 'none' of the nutrient in question. There was however an underlying feeling, not expressed openly, that these products would be 'low' in the claimed nutrient, certainly lower than products that did not carry a 'no added' claim, and most probably healthier as well.

The researchers speculate that this 'underlying' expression of uncertainty may well be more concrete than participants were prepared to acknowledge in the discussions. Once again drawing on the previous quantitative research⁸, almost one third of consumers (28%) said that the 'no added sugar' term meant that the food contains no sugar, another third (30%) said that it contains small amounts of sugar, and only 38% said that it could be either a low, medium or high sugar food (the correct response).

In the group discussions on this issue quite a few participants were prepared to tolerate relatively high amounts of sugar in fruit products that carried a 'no added' claim, and in one case described below, defended the amount of sugar in the product, against the claim.

"it is probably the same if you canned them yourself" [Aust, lower SES, special health needs, 45-64yrs]

"like fruit juices, even natural fruit juices have a fair bit of sugar in them"
[Aust, low SES, highly health conscious, 24-44yrs]

"all fruit has at least some sugar in it, but they haven't put any extra in during the canning" [NZ, lower SES, special health needs, 45-64 yrs]

However, one New Zealand group were more uncertain than all others as to the true meaning behind 'no added' claims, and there was much more disagreement about whether the claim meant the food contained the claimed nutrient at all. The uncertainty was raised by a couple of consumers citing examples of canned foods that carried a 'no added' claim, but declared an amount of the nutrient in the NIP, or the ingredients list.

A different but isolated query was whether the 'no added' claim referred to just the food itself, such as the corn in 'no added salt' canned corn, or whether it also included canning and packing agents such as brine which they felt would have an impact on the

⁸ *Food Labelling Issues: Quantitative Research with Consumers. FSANZ Evaluation Report Series No 4*

salt content and salty flavour of the end product. In this case there was uncertainty as to where the line was drawn in terms of claiming to not have added a particular nutrient.

At the same time the researchers hypothesise that some if not many inquirers are overly confident about their ability to accurately verify a % fat free claim in terms of its relative fat content. This hypothesis is partly informed by the findings in the previous quantitative research⁹, where three quarters of consumers (75%) said that the '94% fat free' term meant that the food was a 'low fat food', where as only 16% correctly described it as a 'medium fat food'.

Every group decided fairly quickly that 'unsweetened' and 'no added sugar' did not mean the same thing, and were clear that 'unsweetened' meant the product had no artificial sweeteners, as well as no added sugar¹⁰. In contrast, they felt a product with a 'no added sugar' claim could still be artificially sweetened. One confectionary product provided as an example for the group discussion carried the term 'sugarless' on the back of the pack, as well as a 'sugar free' claim on the front. This term was viewed initially by the group as adding further confusion, because it added yet another sugar term, which had an unclear definition, although the group quickly agreed that it implied the product, had no sugar at all. However they did believe that it was artificially sweetened .

The NIP is used less to verify 'no added' claims

Consumers were generally far less sceptical of 'no added' claims than most other claims, and use of the NIP to verify 'no added' claims was therefore less necessary. Those who were more trusting of claims in general felt they would rely solely on the 'no added' claim to make a product decision. Nonetheless many participants, and particularly those with a special health need, did report having used the NIP at some stage to gain further information. This was often when a 'no added sugar' claim was used in conjunction with an 'in lite juice' or 'in natural juice' or 'in clear juice' type statement.

'Light' juice vs 'natural' juice

The terms 'light juice' and 'natural juice' were discussed in the context of 'no added sugar' claims. The term 'light juice' was ambiguous and participants were unable to agree whether the claim implied less or more sugar than 'natural' juice. One isolated view was that the claims differed in the type of sugar that was in the product – natural sugar versus another type of sugar.

"I want to know what is in the light juice" [Aust, low SES, highly health conscious, 24-44yrs]

⁹ *Food Labelling Issues: Quantitative Research with Consumers. FSANZ Evaluation Report Series No 4*

¹⁰ *The definition of 'no added sugar' is regulated by clause A1(10) of the Food Standards Code, which prohibits the claim unless the food contains no added sugars as defined in Standard K1, and no added honey, malt, malt extract or maltose. The definition of 'unsweetened' is the same as that for 'no added sugar' in addition prohibiting the claim unless the food contains no added artificial sweetening substance and no added sorbitol, mannitol, glycerol, xylitol, hydrogenated glucose syrup or isomalt.*

Others found the term 'natural' juice more appealing than 'no added sugar' because they felt it inferred that there were no artificial additives or preservatives in the food. There was a feeling amongst these participants that preserved foods would have reasonably high levels of some sort of preserving agent, and that if they were low in sugar, it must be high in either salt, or chemical preservatives.

One way in which 'no added sugar' claims were regarded as potentially misleading was when they are wrongly assumed to indicate a low sugar product, when the product still contains a high amount of intrinsic sugar. One participant, who was a person with diabetes, referred to having been given 'no added sugar' jam, which on closer inspection he discovered was not a suitable product for him.

There was some frustration from a few cynical participants as to where the term 'natural salt' came from.

13.4 Views about disclaimers for 'no added' claims

Three potential disclaimers were explored:

1. 'see Nutrition Information Panel on back';
2. 'Contains natural sugar(s)' / 'Contains natural salt/sodium'; and
3. 'Contains natural sugar(s) – see panel on back' / 'Contains natural salt/sodium – see panel on back'.

Inquirers and consumers with special health needs felt that disclaimers were unnecessary, as they already use the NIP as needed. The disclaimers that made a reference to the NIP were deemed least necessary. One view was that claims were advertising, and therefore it wasn't up to the manufacturer to qualify its claim on the front of the pack.

"I think it is good they have the panel, and the ingredients listing. That is enough information." [Aust, low SES, highly health conscious, 24-44yrs]

Others however responded positively to the disclaimer 'contains natural salt/sugar' because it removed the ambiguity by clarifying whether the product was sugar or salt 'free'. They felt strongly that it should appear on relevant products that carry a 'no added claim'.

Participants felt that a disclaimer in this context would need to be of adequate font size and colour so that it is noticed and can be easily read by shoppers who do not take their glasses with them to the supermarket. They also believed that the font size and colour of the disclaimer would need to depict equal importance as the 'no added' claim itself, but would not necessarily have to be the same size.

14 'LITE' AND 'LIGHT' CLAIMS

14.1 Background and context

A qualitative consumer study commissioned by the then ANZFA (2001) indicated that people were sceptical of 'lite' claims. There was confusion over the meaning of 'lite' and how it related to other claims such as 'free'. Please refer to Appendix D for CoPoNC criteria related to this nutrition content claim.

Participants used the moderator's showcard and real product examples as references during the discussion, as well as examples they recalled from their own experiences.

Key findings: Light/lite' claims were widely recognised and used within their perceived limitations. Inquirers were overwhelmingly negative towards these claims, viewing them as ambiguous, misleading, confusing and/or outright 'trickery'. Most consumers did not know what the claim referred to, and by default would assume that it referred to the nutrient in the food that most needed reducing, in most cases fat. The majority of consumers were in favour of a disclaimer that identifies the nutritional or non-nutritional characteristic of the food to which 'lite/light' refers. The addition of such disclaimers were felt to be important, and would increase both participants understanding of the 'light/lite' claim, and its credibility.

14.2 Familiarity with and use of 'lite/light' claims

'Light/lite' claims were recognised by all participants, and were regarded as widely used by manufacturers, particularly on products such as cheese, yogurt, milk, cereals, icecreams, canned fruit, crisps, olive oil etc.

These claims were used frequently by participants, at least to initially pick up a product before examining the NIP.

14.3 Attitudes towards and understanding of 'lite/light' claims

Attitudes towards 'lite/light' claims depended on a participant's level of interest in and awareness of labelling in general. Inquirers were overwhelmingly negative towards these claims, viewing them as ambiguous, misleading, confusing and/or outright 'trickery'. Many consumers were least trusting of this claim, compared to all others. The views of many of these participants had been informed by 'expose' type television programs and magazine articles that talked about the ambiguity of the meaning of the claim. However less well-informed or label-educated consumers regarded 'lite/light' claims as an attractive and easy way to identify a healthier version of the product. Most of these consumers assumed that the claim referred to macronutrients such as sugar and fat.

However, by far the majority of participants were uncertain, and many were confused, about what the 'lite/light' term referred to. The following conversation indicates the lack of consensus amongst consumers in this study typically felt.

"it is everywhere, but what does light mean?"

"low calorie"

"low fat"

"low in alcohol?"

"low in sugar"

"but when it is on a product it doesn't mean it is light in all of the above, it might be light in one of those particular things" [Aust, lower SES, special health needs, 45-64yrs]

In several other groups both in Australia and in New Zealand, participants discussed the example of 'lite/light' olive oil, which they had each initially assumed to mean 'light in fat' but had later found out meant light in colour. Other examples where 'light' was now known to refer to colour included soy sauce and fruitcake.

In the absence of any clarity as to the meaning of the 'lite/light' claim, most consumers would assume that the claim referred to the nutrient in the food that most needed reducing, and the default assumption was that 'lite' referred to fat.

"I feel like I've been conditioned that L I T E is referring to fat"

Quite a few participants, and particularly those in the older age group 44-65yrs objected strongly to the spelling of 'lite' and deliberately avoided products that carried this claim. The term, spelt this way, was viewed as meaningless, and exacerbated the consumer's frustration with what they felt is an already ambiguous term.

There was a general view in the groups that the term 'light/lite' should not be allowed to stand alone, and that it made much more sense when it was accompanied by a comparative claim, such as "has less fat than our normal icecream".

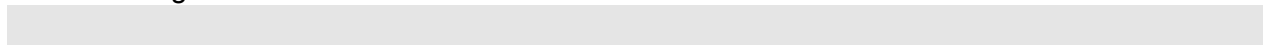
14.4 Impact of disclaimers for 'lite/light' claims

The majority of consumers were wholeheartedly in favour of the use of a disclaimer, which identifies the nutritional or non-nutritional characteristic of the food to which 'lite/light' refers. It was agreed that such a disclaimer must appear in conjunction with the claim, and examples used and endorsed were 'light in colour', 'light in fat', 'light in energy'.

The addition of such disclaimers was felt to be important. Participants believed disclaimers would increase their understanding of and trust in the 'light/lite' claim.

In order to notice and use a disclaimer the groups felt that it would need to be in a font and colour that made it equally as noticeable as the claim, though they did not feel that it was absolutely necessary that it had to be the exact size and colour of the claim.

The implication of permitting a smaller or less distinct font/graphic for the disclaimer, compared to the 'lite' claim itself, is that consumers will need to be informed about the introduction of the disclaimer so that they know to look for it. Once again, the design elements of the disclaimer should bear in mind that many consumers do not shop with their glasses.



15 'DIET' CLAIMS

Please refer to Appendix D for CoPoNC criteria related to this nutrition content claim. Participants used the moderator's showcard and real product examples as references during the discussion, as well as examples they recalled from their own experiences.

Key finding: This claim was viewed as the least trustworthy and most ambiguous of all claims, and mostly irrelevant to consumers. It was also used least, and was associated with weight loss products and therefore deemed useful only for people who are on weight loss 'diets'. Most consumers had strongly negative views about this claim.

15.1 Familiarity with and use of 'diet' claims

The 'diet' claim was viewed as the least trustworthy and most ambiguous claim, and irrelevant to most consumers. Of all the nutrition content claims examined in this study, it was least used because it was associated with weight loss products and therefore only useful for people who are on weight loss 'diets'.

The most top of mind example of a 'diet' claim was diet soft drinks such as 'diet coke'. Many consumers also recalled having seen a diet yogurt product when it was introduced by the moderator.

15.2 Understanding of 'diet' claims

Most consumers had strongly negative views about this claim, mainly due to:

- an association that diet foods taste bad; and
- ambiguity about what the claim means.

The intention behind the claim was very much viewed as trying to make one feel better about the food choices they make that carry this claim:

"it means it's gotta be better for you than coke"

"low fat is just reduced the amount of fat in it, or taken the fat out, whereas diet generally substitutes artificial sweeteners"

"to me, it might not even mean fat, you might be talking about sugar content. To me, diet means reduced sugar content" [Aust, upper SES, moderately health conscious, 25-44yrs]

Depending on the product category, diet meant different things. In soft drinks, 'diet' implied it was low calorie, had artificial sweeteners, but could possibly have some sugar in it, though less than the original product. In yogurt, it meant artificial sweeteners and less milk or fat.

However, many viewed it as a 'nothing' term, and similar to 'light' in terms of its ambiguity.

“to see diet on a can, it doesn't mean anything to me, it is just a marketing ploy, what does it mean?” [Aust, upper SES, moderately health conscious, 25-44yrs]

Others viewed the term as being 'old' because it was non-specific, as opposed to more detailed claims such as '% fat free' claims.

“you don't see diet products around much any more, they are tending to be a lot of more specific, you know with their 99% fat free or that kind of thing., so I think they are realising people want more information, they want specifics on the box”. [NZ, upper SES, highly & moderately health conscious, 25-44 yrs]

16 DISCLAIMERS AND QUALIFYING CRITERIA

16.1 Background and context

Nutrition content claims provide indications about the level of a nutrient or energy in a food. They do not describe the overall nutritional value of a food. Participants in an ANZFA (2001) commissioned qualitative study were aware that a food might be low or high in a claimed nutrient or energy, but that the food may also contain undesirable levels of other nutrients. For example, some consumers recognised the concept of a fat/sugar trade off. The issue therefore arises as to whether any or all nutrition content claims should have disqualifying criteria. ANZFA (now FSANZ) recommended in the Draft Assessment Report for P234 that disqualifying criteria should be applied to fibre claims, to prevent manufacturers from making them if their product contains too much fat. This study explores the merit of disqualifying criteria more broadly.

Key finding: Overall, the concept of disqualifying criteria was not well supported. Apart from one or two very active inquirers in each group, who strongly agreed with the concept of disqualifying criteria, the majority of participants felt that disqualifying criteria were unnecessary. Consumers on the whole felt capable of deciding for themselves whether a product was an overall healthy choice for them. Disqualifying criteria were seen as important and reasonable when they were closely related to the claimed nutrient. However, the notion of disqualifying products that are high in a nutrient other than the one they have made a claim about was not well understood, and universally not supported.

16.2 Views about disqualifying criteria

Overall, the concept of disqualifying criteria, other than for 'lite' claims, was not well supported or understood. There was, however, a range of views on this issue, which varied depending on the product and the criteria being considered.

Initially, many participants liked the idea of disqualifying criteria, and thought that they would help people who don't read labels, because they would be more straightforward.

"it totally demystifies it, makes it completely clear" [Aust, low SES, highly health conscious, 24-44yrs]

More cynical participants felt that claims implied the foods were healthy, and that therefore people should be protected with disqualifying criteria that related to all nutrients, not just the claimed nutrient.

"Most people splash 100% fat free salad dressing all over the food not realising that the salt content is so high. They shouldn't be able to make that claim so blatantly obvious when something else on the back is so high." [Aust, lower SES, special health needs, 45-64yrs]

In each group there was one or two very active inquirers who strongly agreed with the concept of disqualifying criteria, which they felt would prevent less active inquirers and believers from being misled by a content claim. Whilst these inquirers were very aware of nutrient trade-offs, they felt many other shoppers would not be so attentive, and would judge a food only on the content claim while not being aware that the product may well be less healthy in another way.

However after some thought, the issue of applying disqualifying criteria became quite complicated for most participants, as they struggled to understand how foods would be classified as warranting or not warranting disqualifying criteria. Many objected to the idea of classifying foods as 'healthy' or 'unhealthy' (in another way) and felt this was an impossible objective because people differ on how they wish to judge the 'healthiness' of a food. Within each group, participants were all looking for different things, and for different reasons. For example, one person was mostly concerned about salt, one about sugar, one about fat, while others were not concerned about fat or sugar in 'treat' foods (such as chocolate and biscuits), but they closely monitored their fat intake from 'daily' foods (like dairy and cereals).

The majority of participants didn't feel that one claim suggested the product was healthy.

"If it said "low in carbohydrates", I'd say that was the only claim they can make, I wouldn't expect it to relate to any other claim." [Aust, upper SES, moderately health conscious, 25-44yrs]

Although it was not a majority view, there was an expectation amongst quite a few participants that products were now labelled with all the health benefits they could offer, and so one could expect a product to be less healthy in a particular nutrient compared to similar products that made positive content claims. Therefore, there was no assumption, at least amongst the consumers in this study that a low fat claim meant the product was also a positive choice in terms of its sugar and salt content.

"If it is also low in fat, it would say it, they would shout it loud and proud."
[Aust, upper SES, moderately health conscious, 25-44yrs]

"I would expect them to label all the good things, I would never assume."
[Aust, upper SES, moderately health conscious, 25-44yrs]

In the end, the majority of participants decided that as long as there was enough information on the package to evaluate the claim, that was enough.

"That's the consumer choice, it goes back to that."

"It should be up to you to read it...to read Coco Pops, and disregard whatever, fat free or whatever, and then have a read of what is actually in it. You should be informed enough to know that advertising is purely to get people."

“I guess the individual consumer, I think they do have to take responsibility, as long as the information is there and in a readable format...and I think you know if there is no fat then they are replacing it with sugar in most cases.” [Aust, low SES, highly health conscious, 24-44yrs]

Many participants also raised the question of how they would know if disqualifying criteria were introduced. Informing and educating consumers about the ‘hidden’ rules and regulations around labelling was felt to be very important. Many participants, at the conclusion of the group discussion, felt that they had learned a lot about interpreting and comparing content claims, and their guidelines. They wondered why consumers, as a whole, weren’t informed about what they had learned at the group, and felt it would make label reading and product choice easier.

16.3 Boundaries for disqualifying criteria

Although broadly speaking, consumers did not strongly support the idea of disqualifying criteria; they were more objectionable to having criteria on foods which they knew were less healthy but purchased nonetheless. This included ‘treat’ foods such as chocolates, sweets and lollies, biscuits and chips. They felt that these foods are generally eaten in small amounts, and less frequently. Content claims are therefore rarely looked for to make a ‘healthier’ choice as the decision to eat a less healthy food has already been made. Products carrying content claims in these categories are usually associated with a taste trade off, which is rarely worth the health benefit.

With the exception of ‘lite’ claims, which consumers strongly felt needed ‘qualifying’ criteria (rather than disqualifying criteria), there was no particular content claim that consumers felt was more in need of disqualifying criteria than any. Participants were most familiar with fat, salt and sugar trade offs, however the ‘undeclared’ trade off was seen to apply equally as likely to each of the content claims addressed in this study.

Because of the amount of information and range of content claims that had to be covered in this study, the topic of disqualifying criteria could not be addressed in great detail. Much of the discussion on this topic was taken up with explaining to consumers what disqualifying criteria meant, and how they would work. It is therefore difficult to draw conclusive findings about the support for, and dissenting views about disqualifying criteria. However it can be assumed that consumers saw no obvious need for such criteria and felt, on the whole, that they were capable of deciding for themselves whether a product was an overall healthy choice for them. Whether their self-confidence in their capacity to do this correctly is warranted cannot be speculated from this study. It is recommended by the researchers that further small-scale research, dedicated to this topic, be undertaken before final recommendations are made.

16.4 Reactions to specific disqualifying criteria

Reactions to two alternate types of disqualifying criteria were explored:

- disqualifying criteria that apply to nutrients or energy which relate to the claimed nutrient (e.g. limiting the saturated fat content permitted in a food when a nutrition content claim is made about fat); and
- disqualifying criteria that apply to nutrients or energy which don't appear to relate to the claimed nutrient (e.g. limiting the fat content permitted in a food when a nutrition content claim is made about sodium);

Keeping in mind that many participants regarded disqualifying criteria as largely unnecessary, reactions to the first suggestion were by far more positive than the second.

Example one

Participants saw disqualifying criteria as being important and reasonable when they closely related to the claimed nutrient. The strongest supporters of this type of disqualifying criteria were those who had a good understanding of the key macronutrients fat, salt and sugar, and who were more cynical in their views about consumers being misled into buying foods that are healthy, when in fact they are not. The idea that a manufacturer should not be able to make a claim about fat, when the product was too high in saturated fat made perfect sense to these participants.

“fat is fat, it's not a healthy choice” [Aust, lower SES, moderately health conscious, 45-64yrs]

However, discussion of this kind of disqualifying criteria led to confusion amongst many others that couldn't think of an example of where this might not be happening. The example of fat/saturated fat was seen as “the bleeding obvious” amongst some as they were unsure as to how a manufacturer could claim low in fat if the product was not low in saturated fat. Their assumption was that a product low in fat would already be low in saturated fat.

Therefore, disqualifying criteria of this kind – as applied to nutrients that are closely related were seen as reasonable, and most people assumed they were already happening. There was a feeling after the discussion that if they aren't already happening, these rules should be put in place.

Example two

The notion of disqualifying products that are high in a nutrient other than the one they have made a claim about was not well understood, and universally not supported. Only the most health conscious and zealous participants could see merit in this kind of disqualifying criteria, the majority viewed it as ‘going too far’.

“it puts too many restrictions on, I mean you wouldn’t have a sweet would you, once you put on all the restrictions” ” [Aust, lower SES, moderately health conscious, 45-64yrs]

“I think it is going too far, because if they say it’s 99% fat free, if that’s what it is then that’s what it is, they’ve got nothing about it being 100% sugar in it or what ever, it’s up to you the person to read the thing (NIP)” [Aust, lower SES, moderately health conscious, 45-64yrs]

The strong majority view in every group was that it was up to the individual consumer to decide what they will make of a content claim and how far they wish to think beyond the claim. While it was widely agreed that content claims can be misleading, it was also felt that they are generally not untruthful, and that all the information needed to make an assessment about the overall nutritional value of the product is available on the back of the pack.

17 IMPORTANCE OF CONSUMER INFORMATION AND EDUCATION

This study has identified a need to inform and educate consumers about nutrition content claims. Consumers were looking for standardisation and agreed meaning behind the various words and terms used in content claims, about which currently they had little understanding.

Most had assumed the terminology and wording of content claims is haphazard and ad hoc, determined by what is popular, and therefore most attractive to manufacturers rather than consumers.

Many consumers felt they needed to look beyond the claim about a single nutrient, and assess the value of a food based on several nutrients. They were confused and frustrated because there is no common consumer understanding of terms such as 'high', 'low', 'reduced', 'source of', 'light' etc.

It is recommend that any changes to nutrition content claims are preceded or immediately followed by a mass consumer information strategy that advises consumers of what to look out for, and how to use content claims to make informed decisions about the foods they buy.

New labelling elements that are introduced to 'protect' or better assist consumers, such as disclaimers and reference food statements are not likely to be noticed unless consumers are informed about them and their intention. Almost every consumer in this study was unaware of reference food statements on products carrying comparative claims such as 'reduced', but most would find this useful were it known to them.

Regulatory authorities may well wish to give consideration to the advantages (and disadvantages) of consumers' current distinction between the 'truthfulness' information on the front and back of the package. Any new labelling elements that are introduced to the front of the pack, such as disclaimers, run the risk of being dismissed by consumers without an accompanying consumer awareness strategy.

APPENDIX A RECRUITMENT SCREENING CRITERIA

APPENDIX B DISCUSSION GUIDE

APPENDIX C SHOW CARDS AND PROMPT MATERIALS

APPENDIX D
CODE OF PRACTICE ON NUTRIENT CLAIMS IN FOOD
LABELS AND IN ADVERTISEMENTS

CRITERIA FOR NUTRITION CONTENT CLAIMS RELEVANT TO THIS STUDY AS PROVIDED IN THE FOOD STANDARDS CODE AND THE CODE OF PRACTICE FOR NUTRIENT CLAIMS IN FOOD LABELS AND IN ADVERTISEMENTS

COMPARATIVE CLAIMS

CoPoNC	Must be a statement of comparison with the reference food in close proximity to the claim. In general comparative claims for specific nutrients are based on a relative difference of at least 25% in the energy value or nutrient content.
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TOTAL FAT

LOW-FAT	
CoPoNC	≤ 3 g total fat/ 100 g food or 1.5 g total fat per 100 g liquid food
REDUCED/LESS FAT	
CoPoNC	≤ 75% of total fat content of same quantity of ref food; and must be reduction of at least 3 g fat per 100 g food, or 1.5 g fat per 100 g liquid food, compared with same quantity of ref food; and MUST BE A STATEMENT OF COMPARISON WITH REF FOOD
X% FAT FREE	
CoPoNC	Meet requirements for 'low fat' and must carry statement of actual total fat content (expressed as a percentage of food) in close proximity to claim
FAT FREE	
CoPoNC	≤ 0.15 g total fat per 100 g food

CHOLESTEROL

LOW CHOLESTEROL	
COPONC	≤ 20 mg chol per 100 g food; and food must either meet conditions for 'low fat' claim or fatty acid component of food must contain ≤ 20% sat fatty acids and ≥ 40% of <i>cis</i> -poly or of <i>cis</i> -mono fatty acids
REDUCED/LESS CHOLESTEROL	
CoPoNC	Must meet conditions for 'low chol' claim and must carry statement of comparison with ref food; and food must either meet conditions for a 'low fat' claim, or the fatty acid component of the food must contain ≤ 20% sat fatty acids and ≥ 40% <i>cis</i> -poly or of <i>cis</i> -mono fatty acids
NZFR	Contains at least 1/3 less cholesterol compared with normal counterpart; and must have a statement of comparison with named normal counterpart #
CHOLESTEROL FREE	
COPONC	≤ 3 mg chol per 100 g food; and the food must either meet the conditions for 'low fat' claim or the fatty acid component of the food must contain ≤ 20% sat fatty acids and ≥ 40% of <i>cis</i> -poly or of <i>cis</i> -mono fatty acids

SUGARS

NO ADDED SUGAR(S)	
CoPoNC	Regulated by clause A1(10) of Food Standards Code
Volume 1	A1(10) prohibits the claim unless the food contains no added sugar or related products as defined in Standard K1; no added honey as defined in Standard K2; and no added malt, malt extract or maltose
UNSWEETENED	
CoPoNC	Regulated by clause A1(10A) of Food Standards Code
Volume 1	Clause A1(10A) prohibits the claim unless the product contains: no added sugars as defined in Standard K1, no added honey as defined in Standard K2, malt, malt extract or maltose, no added artificial sweetening substance as defined in Standard A8; and no added sorbitol, mannitol, glycerol, xylitol, maltitol, maltitol syrup, isomalt or lactitol

NO ADDED SALT/SODIUM, UNSALTED

CoPoNC	Regulated by clause A1(24) of the Food Standards Code (Volume 1)
Volume 1	Clause A1(24) states that the food and its ingredients must contain no added salt, no added sodium compound and must be unsalted

GENERAL

FREE	
CoPoNC	Finite limits are permitted for certain nutrients, namely fat, cholesterol, sodium and sugar.
X% FREE (OTHER THAN FAT)	
CoPoNC	Not permitted
LIGHT OR LITE	
CoPoNC	'light' characteristic of food to be stated on label. If claim refers to nutrient or energy, food must comply with conditions for 'reduced' or 'low' claim
DIET	
CoPoNC	Must comply with Clause 14 of Standard 1.2.8 – Low Joule Claims or: Energy content of food must not contain > 60% of the energy content of the same quantity of ref food; and food must contain at least 170 kJ less energy per 100 g of food, or 80 kJ less per 100 g liquid food, compared with the same quantity of ref food; and must be statement of comparison with ref food
Volume 2	Must comply with Clause 14 of Standard 1.2.8 – Low Joule Claims

PROTEIN AND CARBOHYDRATE CLAIMS

COPONC HAS NO CRITERIA FOR CARBOHYDRATE OR PROTEIN CLAIMS