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Contact: [Christopher Newman](#) or [Vladimir Dovijarov](#)

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The Picture of Health: Do We Trust Images Over Facts When It Comes to Nutrition Labeling?

Nutrition information on the front of packaged foods, rather than only the back, has become a powerful tool in guiding consumers to healthy selections at the supermarket. However, according to a recent study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#), the way the information is depicted (descriptively versus numerically) makes an enormous difference.



“When comparing many different brands of the same food with front-of-package nutrition information, consumers are markedly more persuaded by options with more descriptive or graphic labeling (such as Wal-mart’s ‘Great for You’ line) than labeling that’s more numeric and factual,” write authors Christopher L. Newman (University of Mississippi), Elizabeth Howlett, and Scot Burton (both University of Arkansas).

In one study, consumers were shown similar generic frozen pizzas and asked to choose the healthiest ones. They consistently chose the options with a front label saying “Healthy Selection,” for example, or an image showing a high number of stars the pizza earned in a healthy rating system. The same pizzas, with only numeric listings of calories, fat, sodium and sugar on the front, were perceived as less healthy.

Another study required consumers to select the healthiest microwavable soups from a display on a mock grocery shelf. Again, with all other packaging remaining constant, the packages with healthy icons on the front (with or without additional numeric nutrition labeling) were chosen over packages with solely the numeric nutrition labeling.

The exception was when consumers assessed only a single item, not comparing it with other items of its kind. In that case, consumers were more influenced by specific numeric nutrition labeling than by images.

“Supermarket offerings have increased by more than 300% in the past few decades. When we’re in the challenging position of evaluating and comparing the healthfulness of so many different products at once, the more descriptive and illustrative the front-of-package labeling, the greater impact it has on our choices,” the authors conclude.

Christopher L. Newman, Elizabeth Howlett, and Scot Burton. “[Effects of Objective and Evaluative Front-of-Package Cues on Food Evaluation and Choice: The Moderating Influence of Comparative and Noncomparative Processing Contexts.](#)” *Journal of Consumer Research*: February 2016. DOI: [10.1093/jcr/ucv050](https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucv050)



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