

Industry research on food labeling is high in bias

By [Eva Greenthal, MS, MPH](#)

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Photo: Antonioguillen - stock.adobe.com.

Veteran food industry watchdog Marion Nestle once called the International Food Information Council (IFIC) “the [most reasonable of industry front groups](#).” Reasonable or not, IFIC is still an

industry-funded research firm paid to prop up corporate interests, and its bias is on full display in a [recent IFIC publication](#) summarizing findings from a series of experiments on front-of-package (FOP) nutrition labeling.

Unpacking industry-funded front-of-package labeling research

The food industry has spent more than a decade derailing progress toward U.S. regulations that would require [simple nutrition information](#) on the fronts of food packages to promote transparency and healthier food choices, so it's no surprise that the spin doctors at IFIC are presenting the results from their recent study as arguments against strong front-of-package labeling regulation.

The [topline conclusion of IFIC's report](#) (which did not undergo peer review) is that "no single FOP scheme was best."

To its credit, [IFIC transparently published](#) all of its research questions and results. However, the group's main experiment did not test the label format under the FDA's consideration which is preferred by most public health advocates and is most similar to front-of-package labels already adopted in [more than a dozen countries](#). It also chose to focus its conclusions on null findings, sweeping under the rug significant findings that did not align with IFIC's preferred narrative. These choices betray a pro-industry bias and an apparent agenda to influence FDA policy in favor of the industry's preferred "[Facts Up Front](#)"-style labels.

The long road to front-of-package nutrition labeling regulation

For background, the Institute of Medicine first called on U.S. regulators to [introduce front-of-package labeling](#) in a series of reports from 2010-2012, sparking the FDA to [consider requiring such labels](#) under the Obama administration. In response, two of the largest food industry trade groups—the Grocery Manufacturers Association (now Consumer Brands Association) and FMI, The Food Industry Association—successfully staved off regulation for 13 years and counting by introducing the industry-led, voluntary [Facts Up Front](#) label. Facts Up Front allows manufacturers to display icons

with per-serving quantities of calories, saturated fat, sodium, added sugars (“nutrients to limit”), and up to two “nutrients to encourage,” including dietary fiber, protein, calcium, potassium, or Vitamins A, C, or D.

Public health advocates and nutrition researchers point out that [not a single study](#) shows Facts Up Front-style labels encourage healthier choices. However, other label formats have proven highly successful, particularly those that characterize the levels of nutrients using simple terms like “High” that help put numerical information already available on the Nutrition Facts label into context, rather than relying only on the numbers, as Facts Up Front does.

In the past few years, the FDA has shown renewed interest in adopting a [mandatory front-of-pack labeling](#) system, and a proposed rule is now slated for this year. Predictably, industry has been advocating for the FDA to select the Facts Up Front design (or something very similar). Industry argues that if the FDA seeks to replace Facts Up Front with something new, the new system must “[demonstrate a clear benefit](#)” above this already widely used and recognized front-of-pack nutrition labeling approach.” In so doing, the industry is arguing that the effort it began principally to stave off regulation should be considered both the status quo and the gold standard.

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Flawed methods produce predictably flawed results

Last year, the FDA published images of [eight potential front-of-package label designs](#) under consideration, which fell into three broad categories:

- 1 Labels that are modeled after industry's Facts Up Front voluntary labeling system
- 2 Nutrition Info labels (rating levels of nutrients as High, Medium, or Low)
- 3 High In labels (only identifying products with High levels of specific nutrients, very similar to labels [recently adopted in Canada](#))

The FDA also announced plans to [conduct an online experiment](#) comparing consumer responses to these different labeling schemes.

[IFIC's study](#), similar in design to the FDA's, looked at different combinations and variations of the FDA's potential schemes across five different experimental tests—but the first of these experiments, which was highlighted in the group's topline finding, conspicuously did not include the "High In" labels that currently appear most likely to move the needle on public health. Instead, for this experiment, IFIC selected two black-and-white variations of the Nutrition Info-style label, excluding the more colorful, potentially more effective designs that the FDA put forth, and two Facts Up Front-style labels—one proposed by the FDA and one identical to the current industry-led Facts Up Front label.

Examples of the eight front-of-package labeling schemes used in FDA's study

GDA (Guideline Daily Amount)	Nutrition Info	Nutrition Info w/ DV	Nutrition Info w/ Color
			
Nutrition Info w/ DV and Color	Nutrition Info w/ Magnifying Glass	High In	High In w/ DV
			

Photo: FDA.

Examples of the four front-of-package labeling schemes used in IFIC's study*

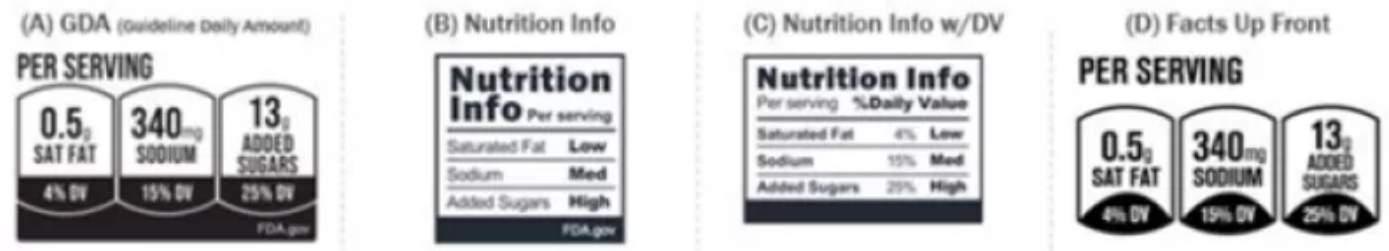


Photo: International Food Information Council (IFIC).

**the study also included versions of these same schemes with calories and/or fiber in addition to saturated fat, sodium, and added sugars*

The report describing the study included [nine key findings](#), the first of which was highlighted in the group's [press release](#) and prominently parroted in a related [news article](#), boldly declaring: "No single FOP scheme was superior to any other FOP scheme in helping consumers identify the healthiest and least healthy choices."

A more accurate summary would have stated, "There was no clear winner between the two least promising FOP approaches."

Yet even this statement wouldn't quite be true. While neither type of scheme IFIC tested performed significantly better in terms of helping consumers identify the *healthiest* choice (except when testing schemes that included fiber, which FDA is not considering), the Nutrition Info labels were actually significantly more effective in helping consumers identify the *least healthy* choice compared to the food industry's Facts Up Front-style labels. Unsurprisingly, IFIC chose not to highlight this as its first key finding.

The bottom line

This latest report from IFIC, and the headlines surrounding it, are an important reminder that advocates, policymakers, and the media should approach industry-funded research with extreme caution. Industry stakeholders will likely reference this study in comments attacking the FDA's forthcoming proposed regulations, pretending it provides conclusive evidence that [Facts Up Front is better suited](#) than other approaches. The FDA should recognize that such comments are high in bias and must be taken with a grain of salt.

Eva Greenthal (she/her) oversees CSPI's federal food labeling work, leveraging the food label as a powerful public health tool to influence consumer and industry behavior. Eva also conducts research and supports CSPI's science-centered approach to advocacy as a member of the Science Department.

Prior to joining CSPI, Eva led a pilot evaluation of the nation's first hospital-based food pantry and worked on research initiatives related to alcohol literacy and healthy habits for young children. Before that, Eva served as a Program Coordinator for Let's Go! at Maine Medical Center and as an AmeriCorps VISTA Member at HealthReach Community Health Centers in Waterville, Maine. Eva holds a dual MS/MPH degree in Food Policy and Applied Nutrition from Tufts University and a BA in Environmental Studies from University of Michigan.

Eva joined CSPI in February 2019.



Eva Greenthal, MS, MPH

Senior Policy Scientist

egreenthal@cspinet.org

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