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Labels on Meat and Poultry Products



United States
Department of
Agriculture

PREPARED BY
Food Safety
and Quality
Service

Agriculture
Information
Bulletin 443



Labels on Meat and Poultry Products

Frankfurters, turkey potpie, chicken soup, chili con carne, pizza with sausage — these are a few of the processed meat and poultry products that are subject to the inspection and labeling requirements of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Federal laws require truthful and accurate information on the labels of all processed foods, and the regulation of food labeling is shared by two agencies — USDA's Food Safety and Quality Service (FSQS) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

Foods containing more than 3 percent fresh meat or at least 2 percent cooked poultry; and dried, liquid, and frozen egg products are subject to USDA inspection requirements.

All labels for meat and poultry products must be submitted for approval in advance of their use to the FSQS label review staff. Inspectors in the processing plants verify that the products conform with the approval labels.

Since 1978, FSQS, FDA, and the Federal Trade Commission's Bureau of Consumer Protection (which has jurisdiction over food advertising) have been working to make existing labeling laws and regulations more consistent and more responsive to consumers' needs. The proposed plan announced by the agencies in the December 21, 1979, Federal Register would improve and increase information on ingredients, nutritional content, and freshness of processed food products.

Present USDA Requirements for Meat and Poultry Product Labels

PRODUCT NAME must be the name as defined by a USDA standard, the product's common or usual name, or a descriptive name. It cannot be false or misleading. FSQS sets minimum meat and poultry requirements (standards) for a long list of products — from baby food to won ton soup. For example, in order for a product to be labeled "Beef with Gravy," it must contain at least 50 percent cooked beef. A minimum of 35 percent cooked beef is required in "Gravy with Beef."

INGREDIENTS must be listed in descending order of predominance — from most to least, according to their weight in the product recipe. Spices and flavorings may be grouped together and listed as "spices" and "flavorings" without specific names. The use of preservatives or artificial color or flavor is always indicated on the label.



Poultry



Meat

A *USDA INSPECTION MARK* must appear on all packaged meat or poultry products that have been federally inspected and approved for wholesomeness. State inspection marks are required on State-inspected products, which cannot be shipped from one state to another.

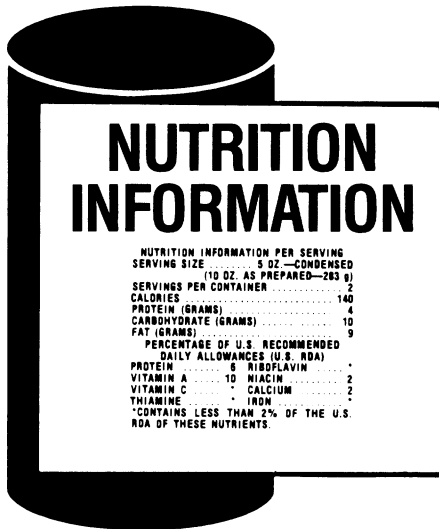
NET QUANTITY must be an accurate measure of the contents, stated in pounds and/or ounces. The weight of the container is not included. Metric measures may also be listed, but may not replace the conventional measures. Here are some approximate metric equivalents to weights commonly found on meat and poultry products:

- 1 ounce = 28 g (grams)
- 8 ounces = 227 g
- 1 pound (16 ounces) = 454 g or .45kg (kilograms)

THE FIRM NAME AND ADDRESS may be that of the manufacturer, packer, or distributor of the product.

Other USDA Requirements

SPECIAL HANDLING INSTRUCTIONS must appear on labels of perishable products; for example, “Keep frozen” or “Keep refrigerated.”



NUTRITION LABELING is not mandatory for meat and poultry products, but some companies display it voluntarily. When it is used, FSQS asks meat and poultry product companies to comply with the format established by FDA regulations and to include information on the following: The size of one serving expressed in common household terms such as ounces, cups, slices, pieces; the number of servings per container; the number of calories in a serving; the number of grams of protein, carbohydrate, and fat in a serving; the percentages of the U.S. Recommended Daily Allowances (U.S. RDA) of protein, five vitamins, and two minerals per serving. USDA also permits the use of an abbreviated format, consisting of calorie, protein, fat, and carbohydrate listings.



OPEN DATING is a system of labeling food packages with calendar dates that indicate when a food's freshness or quality is expected to change. It is not mandatory under Federal law, but over 20 States require it, and a number of manufacturers and retailers provide the information voluntarily. Open dating may indicate: the date the food was packaged, the last date a product should be sold to allow reasonable home storage time, or the date after which the food is no longer at its most acceptable level of quality. FSQS requires companies that use open dating to explain on the label the meaning of the calendar date.

PHOTOGRAPHS OR ARTWORK on meat and poultry product labels must accurately represent the contents of the package. For example, if five slices of meat are shown, there must be at least that amount of meat inside the container. If garnishes or side dishes pictured on the label are not part of the contents, a phrase such as "suggested serving" must appear nearby. Similarly, a product's ingredients may not be misrepresented; a picture of a fresh onion may not appear if, in fact, dehydrated onions were used in the product.

TRANSPARENT OR SEMITRANSSPARENT WRAPPERS must not give a false impression of the product. One unacceptable practice is the use of red color on transparent bacon wrappers. This might cause shoppers to assume the bacon is leaner than it really is.

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN must be shown on the labels of imported meat and meat products in the United States if sold in the same form in which they are imported (such as canned ham). However, imported meat used as an ingredient in a meat product manufactured in the United States loses its identity; foreign beef that is combined with domestic beef in producing frankfurters or other types of sausage is not identified on the label.

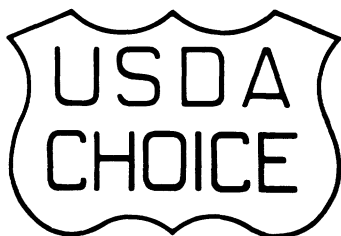


Additional Information on Some Labels

THE UNIVERSAL PRODUCT CODE is a nationally coordinated system of product identification designed to make food marketing, wholesaling, and retailing more efficient. The symbols, which consist of vertical bars and numbers, are unique to every product on which they appear. Supermarket checkout clerks scan the symbols with a laser beam device, which then sends a message to the store's central computer. The name and price of the item are flashed on the terminal at the checkout counter and printed on the customer's receipt. The product code does not include price information — that comes from the computer.

RECIPES OR DIRECTIONS FOR USE are neither required nor tested by USDA.

USDA GRADE NAMES are used to indicate the quality of many foods, including beef, turkeys, eggs, butter, fruits, and vegetables. What "quality" actually means depends on the product. For example, quality in beef is measured by color, firmness, texture, and marbling (flecks of fat within the lean). The main meat grades are Prime, Choice, and Good. Poultry is graded A, B, C. Grading of food is voluntary and paid for by the packer or manufacturer. Although most meat and poultry grade names appear on fresh, unprocessed meat and poultry, some processed products also carry USDA grade shields. For example, a club steak TV dinner may display a "Choice" grade shield on its label. This symbol assures consumers that the meat ingredient used in the product actually came from a "Choice" graded beef cut.



“KOSHER” SYMBOLS identify foods which are prepared according to the Jewish dietary laws and certified by specified rabbis (religious leaders) or organizations. The “koshering” process for meat and poultry includes salting and soaking to remove the blood. Some of the commonly used trademarked symbols include: K, (K), and (U).

Possible Changes

FSQS, FDA, and FTC published a joint plan to improve food labeling in the December 21, 1979, Federal Register. It was an “advanced notice of proposed rulemaking.” Advanced notices (1) inform the public of issues under consideration and (2) invite public comment before formal rulemaking procedures begin. The labeling notice included “tentative” proposals to improve labeling on products regulated by FSQS and FDA. Comments on the comprehensive document were accepted until April 21. FSQS is presently evaluating comments pertinent to the labeling of meat, poultry, and egg products.

The following issues are being examined:

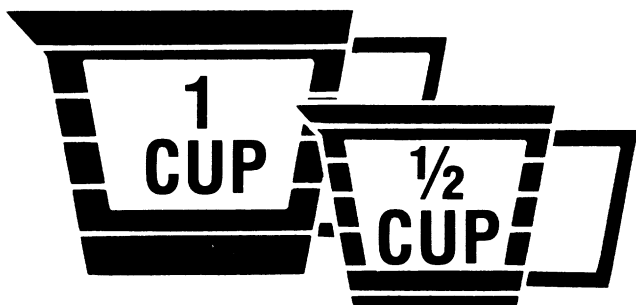


INGREDIENT LABELING

A consumer survey conducted by FDA in 1978 clearly indicated that many consumers are not aware that ingredients are listed in order of their predominance. FSQS is considering proposing a uniform phrase to explain this fact, which would be required with the list of ingredients on all labels of processed meat, poultry, and egg products. For example, a beef stew label might say “Ingredients (from most to least): water, beef, potatoes. . . .”

NUTRITION LABELING

Another possible proposal would require nutrition labels on processed meat, poultry, or egg products about which nutrition claims are made on the label, or to which nutrients have been added. This would bring FSQS nutrition labeling regulations in line with those enforced by FDA.



SERVING SIZES

Serving sizes can help consumers compare the nutritional content of various products. However, serving sizes often are not uniform within product classes. For example, one brand of chicken chow mein may use “1 cup” as a serving size; another may use only “½ cup.” FSQS may propose to establish standardized serving sizes for certain meat and poultry products.

OPEN DATE LABELING

FSQS may also propose that perishable and semiperishable meat, poultry, and egg products—such as bacon, chicken hotdogs, and liquid egg mixtures—display open date labeling.

% BEEF

PERCENTAGE LABELING

To provide consumers more information on amounts of ingredients in processed meat, poultry, and egg products, FSQS is examining the idea of proposing that certain major ingredients in a variety of products be listed by percentage.

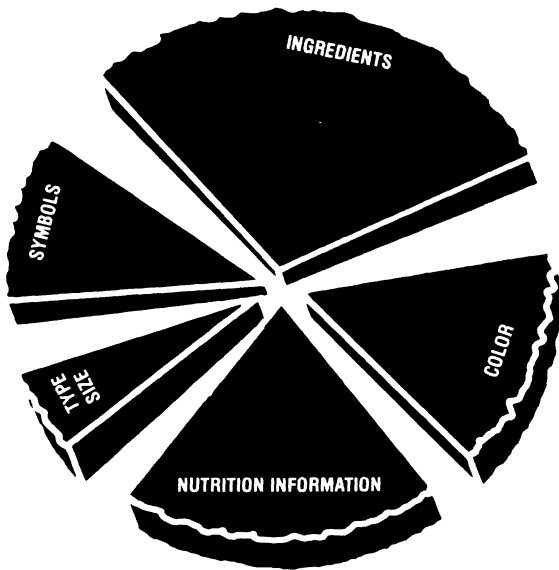
LABELING OF FATS AND OILS

FSQS presently allows the use of general terms such as “animal fat” and “vegetable oil” on meat and poultry product labels without reference to the specific source of the fat or oil (for example, corn oil, palm oil.) However, some consumers wish to avoid certain oils because of allergies or

other health problems, religious concerns, or personal preference. To provide more specific fat and oil labeling, FSQS is considering proposing that foods with 10 percent or more fat on a dry weight basis (before processing) declare on their labels the specific source of the fat or oil. Foods containing less than 10 percent would use an “and/or” approach— “... vegetable oil (may contain cottonseed oil, corn oil, and/or palm oil.)”

THE WAY LABELS LOOK

To present ingredient and nutrition information on labels in the best possible way, FSQS, FDA, and FTC are also conducting a program to design alternative food label formats.



For More Information

Single free copies of the following publications are available from: FSQS Information, Rm. 3606-S, USDA, Washington, D.C. 20250.

Standards for Meat and Poultry Products—A Consumer Reference List

FSQS FACTS: Meat and Poultry Inspection, FSQS-18

How to Buy Food Economically—A Food Buyers' Guide

How to Use USDA Grades in Buying Food, HG-196

Public Participation: Getting Involved in FSQS, FSQS-10

Summary of the December 21, 1979, Labeling Notice

February 1981

Supersedes "FSQS Facts: About Labels on Meat and Poultry,"
FSQS-20, Oct. 1979.