

Opinion: Change in food labels probably a mistake

By Roberto A. Ferdman, Washington Post

The good news is that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration is poised to make the Nutrition Facts label on many packaged foods significantly more honest. The bad news is that this well-intentioned fix could seriously backfire.

As part of a label overhaul, which the FDA announced last year, the agency is planning to update the serving sizes to better reflect the amount of food people actually consume. The proposed tweak, which is almost through its months-long comment period and is expected to begin to take effect next year, would affect packaged foods for which serving sizes are seen as too low (just under 20 percent of all packaged foods), including popular items like ice cream, potato chips and soda.

The thinking behind the portion adjustment is fairly simple. It's meant to correct for the fact that recent studies show that Americans tend to eat a good deal more in one sitting than is indicated on current labels – which were last adjusted 20 years ago, based on data from a survey conducted from 1977 to 1988. Changing the serving size for ice cream, for example – from the current half cup to a more realistic full cup – means the amount of calories, fat and sugar per serving will double. And that would theoretically convince people to eat less ice cream.

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