

The Future of Food Labeling in Belgium

Food labeling is crucial in shaping consumer choices and promoting public health in Belgium. The effectiveness of food labeling has a profound impact on consumers' ability to make informed decisions about their diet and overall well-being. This whitepaper, based on NSF's commissioned comprehensive research of 1,000 Belgian adults, delves into the importance, efficacy, challenges, and consumer expectations of food labeling in Belgium.

For food brands operating in Belgium, complying with labeling regulations is paramount, not only to meet legal requirements but also to build consumer trust and maintain transparency. This task is becoming increasingly complex in today's globalized food market, particularly given Belgium's position at the heart of the European Union. As dietary trends evolve, new ingredients emerge, and scientific understanding of nutrition advances, food companies must constantly update their labels to reflect these changes.

1. The role of food labels in consumer decision-making

Food labeling has a significant impact on consumer purchasing behavior in Belgium. According to our research, nearly three-quarters (73%) of Belgian adults read food labels before making a purchase, with this figure rising to 83% among those aged 18 to 34, highlighting the importance younger consumers place on food label information. Over half (52%) of Belgian adults pay more attention to food labels than they did five years ago, increasing to 63% of Gen Z's (18 to 27-year-olds).

The influence of food labels extends beyond the initial purchase decision, as they also shape dietary choices and enable consumers to compare products. Only half (50%) of Belgian adults agree that current food labels provide them with enough information to make the right food choices. However, notably fewer (37%) agree that current labels adequately address sustainability concerns, indicating a gap between consumer expectations and the information provided on labels.



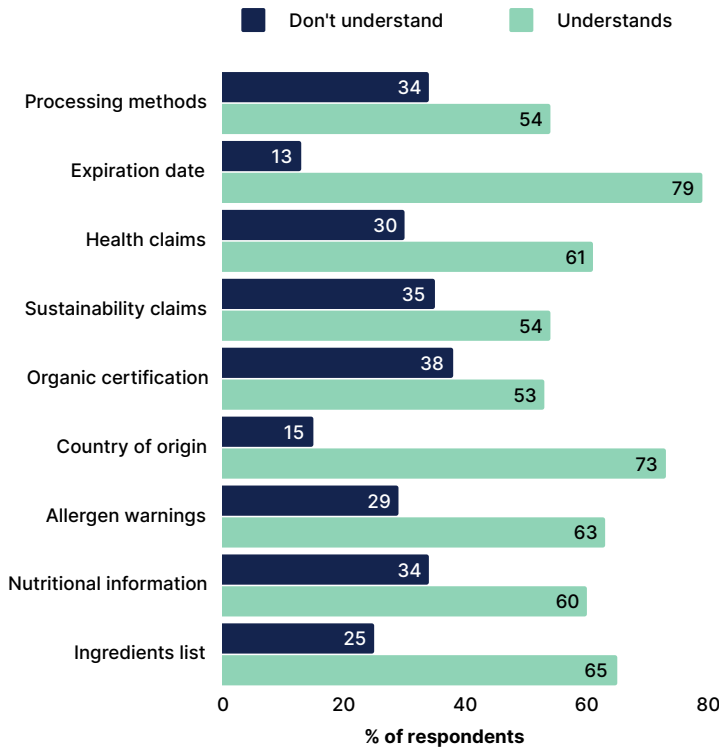
Influence on purchasing behavior

The most commonly read types of food labeling in Belgium are expiration dates (63%), ingredient lists (45%), nutritional information (38%), country of origin (32%), allergen warnings (23%) and health claims (22%). Older consumers over 55 are much more likely to look at expiration dates than 18 to 34 year olds, (77% vs 44%) as well as ingredient lists (48% vs 41%). In contrast, younger adults aged 18 to 34 are much more concerned with reading allergen warnings than over-55's (29% vs 18%), health claims (28% vs 20%), organic certification (22% vs 16%) and processing methods (20% vs 13%).

These differences in labeling priorities across age groups highlight the need for food manufacturers and retailers to tailor their labeling strategies to meet the diverse needs of their target consumers in the Belgian market. By providing clear, comprehensive, and relevant information on food labels, brands can build trust and loyalty among their customer base.

Comprehension of food labeling

Comprehension is generally high across food labeling.



Impact on dietary choices

Food labels play a crucial role in helping consumers make informed dietary choices. When it comes to ultra-processed foods (UPFs), Belgian adults are more likely to report that it is challenging to identify them through food labels (44%). **With only one in ten (10%) finding it very easy to identify UPFs, there is significant room for improvement in labeling practices.**

Younger adults demonstrate a much higher comprehension of food labels in this area, with 55% reporting that they find it easy to identify UPFs, compared to 32% of those over 55.

The interpretation of health claims on food labels also presents a challenge, particularly among older consumers. The research indicates that **Belgian adults are split on how trustworthy health claims are, with 44% reporting that they are trustworthy** compared to 45% who think they are untrustworthy. This discrepancy is even more pronounced across age groups, with 53% of those aged 18 to 34 finding health claims trustworthy, compared to only 38% of those over 55.

These findings underscore the importance of clear, accurate and age-appropriate food labeling in supporting healthy dietary choices across different consumer segments. By providing transparent information about the nutritional content and processing methods of food products, labels can empower consumers to make more informed decisions about their health and well-being.

Useful additions and premium pricing

When asked about what information would be most useful as additions to food labeling, Belgian adults cite that comprehensive allergen information (75%) and detailed processing information (72%) would be the most useful. This is followed by an environmental impact score (65%), ethical sourcing information (63%) and a scannable QR code offering extra information (59%). Looking across age groups, 18 to 34-year-olds would be most impressed by seeing environmental impact scores (77%), whereas over-55s would most like to see comprehensive allergen information (75%).

In fact, almost half (47%) would be willing to pay more for food products with more comprehensive and transparent food labeling. However, nearly half (45%) reject this idea. Of those who said they would be prepared to pay more, they would most be willing to do so for better ingredients information (31%) and nutritional information (29%). People were the least willing to pay more for health claims (23%) and sustainability claims (22%).

On average, consumers would be willing to pay between 10% and 12% more for products with improved labeling.

By providing detailed, relevant and easily comparable information on food labels, manufacturers and retailers can differentiate their products, build consumer trust and potentially command a premium price for their commitment to transparency. As consumer demands for comprehensive labeling continue to grow, businesses that invest in clear and informative food labels are likely to gain a competitive edge in the market.



2. Challenges in food label comprehension

Despite the general understanding of food labeling among Belgian consumers, there remain significant challenges in comprehending certain aspects of food labels. These challenges impact consumers' ability to make informed decisions about their food choices and overall health.

Complexity of nutritional information

One of the primary challenges consumers face is the complexity of nutritional information presented on food labels. While 60% of Belgian adults report understanding nutritional information, more than a third (34%) still struggle to interpret and apply this data to their dietary needs. The use of technical terms, percentages, and serving sizes can be confusing for many consumers, particularly those with lower levels of nutrition literacy. This complexity can lead to misinterpretation or disregard for important nutritional facts, hindering the ability to make healthier food choices.

To address this challenge, there is a growing push for the standardization of front-of-pack nutritional labeling (FoPNL) across the EU. Currently, various government-endorsed FoPNLs are in use, such as the Nutri-Score, Keyhole, and Nutrinform battery. However, these voluntary schemes have been criticized for not being consumer-friendly or providing adequate information about the nutritional quality of food products. A standardized, mandatory FoPNL system could help simplify nutritional information and enable consumers to make more informed decisions at a glance.

Understanding sustainability claims

Another area of concern is the comprehension of sustainability claims on food labels. The research reveals that only 54% of Belgian adults understand sustainability claims and even fewer (37%) believe that current food labels adequately address



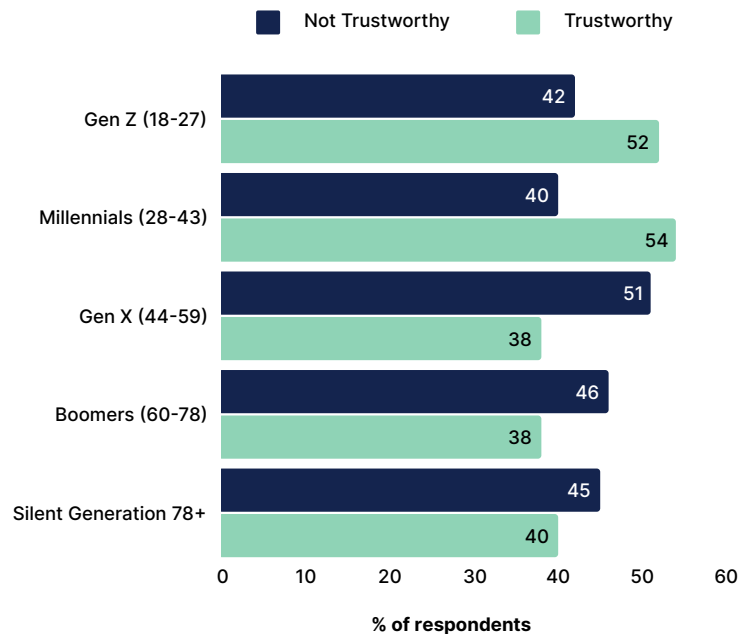
sustainability concerns. This lack of understanding can be attributed to the absence of standardized definitions and criteria for sustainability claims, as well as the proliferation of vague or misleading statements.

Consumers increasingly demand transparency regarding the environmental impact of their food choices, but the current labeling landscape falls short of providing clear, reliable information. The development of standardized eco-labels and more stringent regulations around sustainability claims, as proposed in the EU Green Claims Directive, could help bridge this gap and empower consumers to make more environmentally conscious decisions.

The EU Green Claims Directive represents a crucial step towards improving transparency and reliability in sustainability labeling. As this regulation comes into effect, food manufacturers will need to ensure their environmental claims are backed by robust scientific data and conform to standardized methodologies. This will not only enhance consumer trust but also level the playing field for businesses committed to genuine sustainability practices.

How trustworthy are health claims on food packaging?

Overall, younger people are much more trusting of health claims, as those aged 18-34 are significantly more likely to say that they think health claims are trustworthy than those over 55 (53% vs 38%).



Interpretation of health claims

The interpretation of health claims on food labels also presents a challenge, particularly among older consumers. The research indicates that only 38% of those over 55 find health claims trustworthy, compared to just 53% of those aged 18 to 34. This discrepancy highlights the need for clearer, more substantiated health claims that can be easily understood by consumers across all age groups.

The "health halo" effect, where the presence of certain claims (e.g., organic and natural) leads consumers to perceive a product as healthier overall, can contribute to misinterpretation. Stricter regulations around health claims, along with consumer education initiatives, could help mitigate this effect and ensure that health benefits are communicated accurately and transparently.

Addressing these challenges in food label comprehension requires a multi-faceted approach involving regulatory bodies, food manufacturers, and consumer advocacy groups. By prioritizing clarity, standardization and transparency in food labeling, we can empower consumers to make more informed decisions about their food choices, ultimately contributing to better public health outcomes and a more sustainable food system.

3. Consumer demands for label improvements

As consumers become increasingly health-conscious and environmentally aware, their expectations for food labeling have evolved significantly. The research reveals a growing demand for clearer, more comprehensive and standardized labeling practices that address concerns about allergens, processing methods and sustainability.

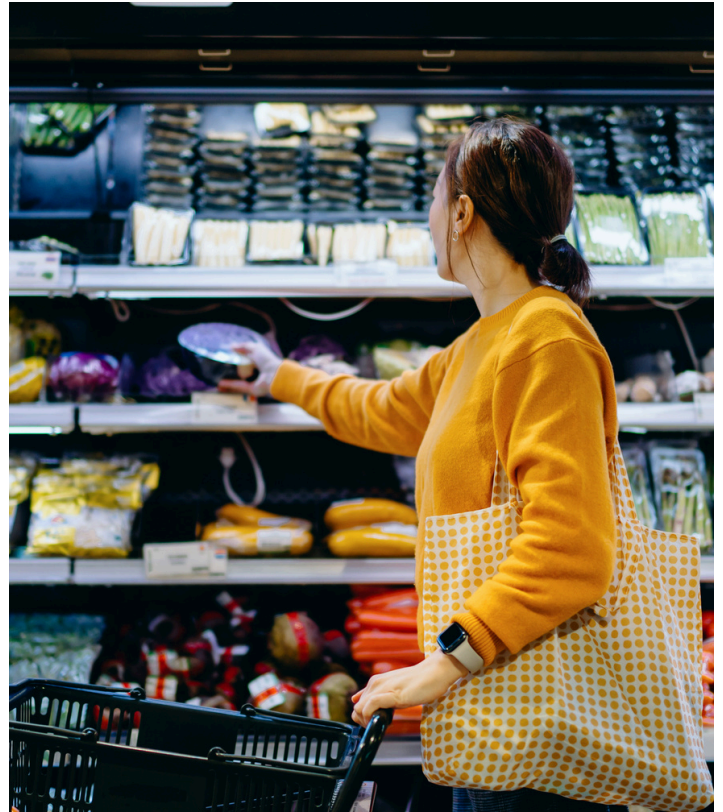
Desire for clearer allergen warnings

One of the most pressing consumer demands is for clearer and more prominent allergen warnings on food labels. With food allergies on the rise, particularly among younger generations, consumers are seeking easily identifiable and comprehensive allergen information to ensure their safety and well-being. The research indicates that 75% of Belgian adults consider comprehensive allergen information to be one of the most useful additions to food labeling. This sentiment is particularly strong among millennial and Gen X consumers (aged 28 to 59), with 81% of those aged 28 to 43 calling for more comprehensive allergen information on labels.

However, the proliferation of precautionary allergen labels and sustainability claims on food packaging may be overwhelming consumers, potentially obscuring critical allergen information and compromising food safety for allergic individuals. This highlights the need for a balanced approach to food labeling that prioritizes essential safety information while still addressing consumer demands for transparency and sustainability.

Call for more detailed processing information

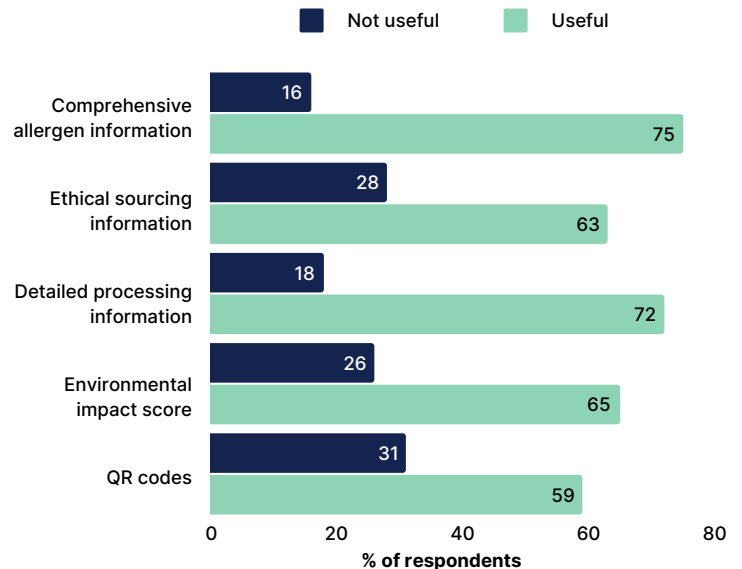
Another key area of consumer interest is detailed food processing information. The research reveals that 72% of Belgian adults consider comprehensive processing information to be one of the most useful additions to food labeling across all age groups.



This growing interest in processing methods reflects a broader trend towards clean-label foods and a heightened awareness of the potential health implications of ultra-processed foods. As consumers seek to make more informed choices about the foods they consume, there is a clear need for food manufacturers to provide transparent and easily understandable information about their processing methods.

The usefulness of labeling additions

Better allergen and food processing information are considered the most useful additions to food labeling.



Need for standardised sustainability metrics

Sustainability has become an increasingly important consideration for consumers when purchasing food products. The research indicates that 58% of Belgian adults say that sustainability is an important consideration when they buy food, with 17% saying that it's very important. However, only 37% believe that current food labels adequately address sustainability concerns.

To address this gap, there is a growing demand for standardized eco-labels and more stringent regulations around sustainability claims. The research shows that 65% of Belgian adults consider an environmental impact score to be a useful addition to food labeling. Furthermore, 63% call for more ethical sourcing information, including information on ingredients or materials sourced responsibly and addressing issues like fair trade, labor practices and animal welfare.

The development of standardized sustainability metrics would enable consumers to make more informed choices based on the environmental impact of their food purchases. However, implementing such a system presents significant challenges, as it would require a coordinated effort among food manufacturers, retailers and regulatory bodies to ensure consistency and reliability.

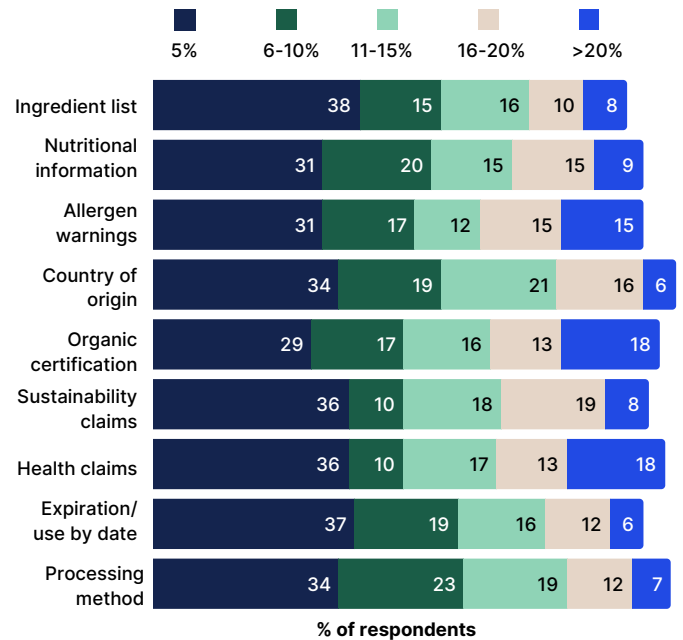
As consumer demands for clearer allergen warnings, detailed processing information, and standardized sustainability metrics continue to grow, food manufacturers and regulatory bodies must work together to develop labeling practices that meet these evolving expectations. By prioritizing transparency, safety and sustainability, the food industry can foster greater trust among consumers and contribute to a healthier, more sustainable food system.



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Premium pricing for comprehensive labeling

Just under half (47%) would be willing to pay more for food products that have more comprehensive and transparent food labeling, rising to 69% of 18 to 34-year-olds. However, 45% reject this idea, rising to 57% amongst those aged over 55. Of those who said they would be prepared to pay more, better ingredients information (38%), country of origin (34%), nutritional information (31%) and allergen information (31%) top the list. People were the least willing to pay more for health claims (23%) and sustainability claims (22%).



The future of food labeling in Belgium

The future of food labeling in Belgium lies in striking a balance between providing comprehensive information and ensuring that this information is easily understandable for consumers. As the host country of the European Union, Belgium has the opportunity to lead the way in developing innovative and effective food labeling practices that could set standards for the rest of Europe.

While this research unveiled significant gaps and presents challenges to the food industry, it also offers opportunities for innovation, relevance, and growth. As the Belgian food landscape continues to evolve to cater to consumers who are increasingly motivated by personal health concerns and broader environmental considerations, food manufacturers must address this call for greater transparency.

By prioritizing transparency, standardization and consumer education, the food industry can foster greater trust among consumers and contribute to better public health outcomes. As consumer demands for clear, comprehensive and reliable food labeling continue to grow, businesses that invest in meeting these expectations are likely to gain a competitive edge in the Belgian market.