CHRISTCHURCH EDITION

THE PRESS

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Food labels can't be trusted

nicole smith

Nutrition labels on food that has been fortified with vitamins and minerals are not to be trusted, a study of common products reveals.

First there was the case of Sirbens, marketed by two Auckland schoolgirls over false claims about vitamin C levels.

Now an official audit by a Christchurch food scientist from Environmental Science and Research shows the problem of questionable labelling is far more widespread.

Dr Barbara Thomson measured nutrient levels in 141 foods, including baby food, cereal and fruit drinks, and compared them with manufacturers' claims on the labels. The difference in levels of vitamin C, D and A, folate, calcium, iron and selenium were striking.

Nearly 8 per cent of samples did not meet the label claims. Of these, 5% had fewer nutrients than the label claimed, potentially in breach of the Fair Trading Act, which prohibits false representations of products.

And 43.5% contained more of the nutrient than the label claimed, which could lead to consumers getting too much of a good thing. The other 43.5% met the label claims.

"The labels don't necessarily reflect what's in the food," said Thomson. "Being over the label claim can be just as bad. The work we've done shows that the products are up to five times over."

Her message to manufacturers: "Wake up, call, guys. Watch this space."

barbara thomson

Among the findings, a fruit-based cereal baby food had about five times the advertised level of vitamin C. A single serve of the food would result in a seven to 12-month-old infant receiving seven to eight times the adequate intake of the vitamin for that age group, although still within the upper limit of the nutrient.

Another baby food had about half the advertised vitamin C concentration.

A fruit cereal had three times the folate claimed on the label. An adult eating ten of the product would exceed the upper intake limit for adults, a potential risk to their health, considering they would also be getting folate from other food sources.

"It means that there's a potential for adverse health effects. They are getting more than is good for them," Thomson said.

Too little folate leads to spina bifida in babies, weakness, fatigue and irritability, hence New Zealand bread, with a few exceptions, will be fortified with folic acid from 2009. Too much folate leads to nerve damage and adverse reproductive and developmental effects.

"I am surprised at the spread of both under and over," said Thomson. "Being under the label claim is unlawful and not good for your health. And being over the claim, while there's no law against it, but to consumers it's good either."

Thomson's tests were performed for the New Zealand Food Safety Authority (NZFSA) over three years and up to five batches of each food were tested for accuracy's sake. She is now taking a closer look at folate levels in products before mandatory fortification.

Her findings so far will not result in actions against manufacturers whose products did not meet label claims.

NZFSA spokeswoman Jenny Reid said the tests were done as part of a monitoring programme, rather than for policing reasons. "It may give us an indication of areas that it's worthwhile following up in the future, but a compliance survey is undertaken in quite a different way.

>> To A2

After Christchurch's first weekend of zero tolerance policing, the city's mayor issues a challenge:

'Get tough on crime'

Night-club scene: A man is taken into custody after allegedly assaulting a woman outside a inner city Christchurch bar on Saturday night. photo: chris sowersby

rob scanlon

Christchurch Mayor Bob Parker wants all sides to play their part in ending crime in the city.

Last week the police announced and began a New York-style publicity regime, known as Broken Windows, targeting minor offences to lift the general level of socially acceptable behaviour, thereby heading off serious crimes.

Parker said it was important it was not just left to the police to try to make the city safer.

"I think it's a tremendous initiative and I want to congratulate them," he said.

"As a community we should be committing ourselves for the next month for a community surge against petty crime and disorderness which can be a nuisance to the city.

"There's a number of offences we could help with by reporting them — like tagging and graffiti.

"Almost everybody carries mobile phones nowadays, so it's something you can immediately report if you want."

Parker cited a case last week when Christchurch City Councillor Gail Sheriff followed a critical of people who had thrown rubbish out of their window, photographed their number plate with her mobile phone and reported it to police.

"That was a great piece of community initiative.

"There's nothing stopping anyone doing stuff like that.

"The community has the ability to be the eyes and ears for the police, it's time we all got on the job and helped the police."

The boy-racer problems could also be contained by people via their mobile phones, he said.

"Let's front up to dangerous driving particularly with the so-called boy racers.

"There's the *555 number which anybody can phone, if you see a critical drinking or people doing wheelies or driving dangerously then you should report that."

Broken Windows was introduced in 1982 in the United States with the basic premise being that if a broken window was left unfixed, vandals would see it as an invitation and smash other windows and could eventually take over the building. Fixing a window early would head off problems.

Parker said its success or otherwise in Christchurch would come down to the involvement of the public.

"If people have graffiti on their fence or property they need to paint it over and people need to keep their eyes open for vandalism," he said.

"This is what being a citizen is all about — it's not a one-way street, it also means being part of the process."

Parker said he did not advocate vigilantes or people taking into a fight and they should call 111 if someone was in danger of being hurt.

INSIDE

>> Hate target gangs A2

CRIME WATCH

- numbers of people on [illegible]
- non-urgent police [illegible]
- [illegible]

PETROL PRICES

Cars stay at home

A dramatic shift away from private vehicle use is coming, with a quarter of Kiwi property to leave their cars at home if the price of petrol hits $2 a litre.

Poll results released by the New Zealand Business Council for Sustainable Development, suggest the $2 mark for a litre of unleaded 91 will be a tipping point for motorists.

The $2 mark has been reached in the Coromandel, West Coast, Northland and the East Coast. Most of these pollled expect petrol prices to rise further in the next two years.

A litre of unleaded 91 petrol bought at Prince Josef now costs about $2.10 but drops the total at Fox Glacier it is several cents cheaper.

At Oamaru in inland North Otago motorists pay $1.97 for a litre of unleaded 91 and in Queenstown it is $1.92.

The survey results, part of a Stuff.co.nz online poll of 2047 people, come as the price of a barrel of crude hit a record $US126 ($NZ160).

Almost a quarter of those surveyed said they had significantly cut petrol use because of high prices, while 21 per cent said they would significantly reduce petrol use if the price hit $2 a litre.

The next significant tipping point would come at $3 a litre, a price possibility if crude prices hit the forecast $US200 a barrel.

Last week the Government backed off introducing an emissions tax on petrol in the face of growing concern over the daily cost of living.

It also backed away from a national fuel tax.

If people are forced from their cars, many are unsure how they will commute.

In Wellington City — with the highest public transport usage in New Zealand — just 52% said they had a viable alternative to their car.

>> Editorial A10

Race against time

Getting supplies to survivors of a brutal cyclone in Myanmar, including these children left in row a race against time to prevent a cholera disaster.

Reports of diarrhoea and skin problems have already surfaced a week after the storm, and health officials fear waterborne illnesses will emerge because of a lack of clean water. Contagious diseases such as measles are also feared. Children face some of the greatest risks.

"The fact that there are people we still haven't gotten to is very disturbing to all of us. We don't know how many that is," said Tim Costello, president of World Vision Australia. —ap

>> Rice exported B1

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