



Highlights of [GAO-08-597](#), a report to the Chair, Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Two thirds of U.S. adults are overweight, and childhood obesity and diabetes are on the rise. To reverse these health problems, experts are urging Americans to eat healthier. Food labels contain information to help consumers who want to make healthy food choices. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) oversees federal labeling rules for 80 percent of foods. GAO was asked to examine (1) FDA's efforts to ensure that domestic and imported foods comply with labeling rules, (2) the challenges FDA faces in these efforts, and (3) the views of key stakeholders on FDA actions needed to mitigate misleading labeling. GAO analyzed FDA data, reports, and requirements on food labeling oversight and compliance and interviewed agency and key stakeholder group officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending actions for FDA to ensure that labeling office managers have the information they need to oversee compliance with labeling laws; ensure the public has timely access to information on labeling violations on FDA's public Web site; and better leverage resources to achieve its mission. In commenting on a draft of this report, FDA stated that the report raised important issues, and agreed, with qualifications, with some of GAO's recommendations, but did not comment on others.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-597](#). For more information, contact Lisa Shames at (202) 512-3841 or shamesl@gao.gov.

FOOD LABELING

FDA Needs to Better Leverage Resources, Improve Oversight, and Effectively Use Available Data to Help Consumers Select Healthy Foods

What GAO Found

FDA's oversight and enforcement efforts have not kept pace with the growing number of food firms. As a result, FDA has little assurance that companies comply with food labeling laws and regulations for, among other things, preventing false or misleading labeling. Specifically:

- FDA does not have reliable data on the number of labels reviewed; the number of inspections, which include label reviews, has declined. For example, of the tens of thousands of foreign food firms in over 150 countries, just 96 were inspected by FDA in 11 countries in fiscal year 2007—down from 211 inspections in 26 countries in 2001.
- FDA's testing for the accuracy of nutrition information on labels in 2000 through 2006 was limited. FDA could not provide data for 2007.
- Although the number of food firms in FDA's jurisdiction has increased, the number of warning letters FDA issued to firms that cited food labeling violations has held fairly steady.
- FDA does not track the complete and timely correction of labeling violations or analyze these and other labeling oversight data in routine reports to inform managers' decisions, or ensure the complete and timely posting of information on its Web site to inform the public.
- In addition to its official recalls database, FDA's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition has continued to waste resources on a second recall database that FDA had agreed to eliminate in 2004, as GAO had recommended.

FDA has reported that limited resources and authorities challenge its efforts to carry out its food safety responsibilities—these challenges also impact efforts to oversee food labeling laws. FDA's *Food Protection Plan* cites the need for authority to, among other things, collect a reinspection user fee, accredit third-party inspectors, and require recalls when voluntary recalls are not effective.

Stakeholders from health, medical, and consumer groups identified actions they believe will mitigate misleading labeling and help consumers identify healthy food. Several stakeholders support a simplified, uniform front-of-package symbol system to convey nutritional quality to consumers. The United Kingdom, Sweden, and the Netherlands have developed voluntary nutrition symbols, while the European Commission has proposed requiring front-of-package labeling of key nutrients.