

Carbon labeling reduces our carbon dioxide footprint—even for those who try to remain uninformed

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Climate labels informing us of a meat product's carbon footprint cause many people to opt for climate-friendlier alternatives. This applies to

people who are curious about a product's carbon footprint, as well as to those who actively avoid wanting to know more. The finding is published in a new study from, among others, the University of Copenhagen. As such, climate labeling food products can be a good way of reducing our climate footprint. But according to the researcher behind the study, labels must be obligatory for them to be effective.

Certain situations exist where we humans strategically avoid greater knowledge and more [information](#)—a phenomenon known as "active information avoidance". It could be that we don't want to know how many calories are in the bag of chips that we've just opened. Or, that we avoid going to the doctor because we fear a certain diagnosis.

But it can also have to do with us not wanting to know about how what we shop for at the supermarket impacts the [climate](#). This is the finding from a new study conducted by the University of Copenhagen and Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, who investigated the efficacy of climate impact information as a way to influence [consumer choice](#).

"Our experiments demonstrate that one out of three people doesn't want to know the climate impact of the food they eat. But at the same time, we can see that there is a [psychological effect](#) when people are informed on its climate impact, in so far as more people end up buying a less CO₂ heavy product," says Associate Professor Jonas Nordström of the University of Copenhagen's Department of Food and Resource Economics.

Information could have a cost

In the experiment, 803 participants were asked to choose between six alternatives consisting of variations of ground meat and a plant-based mixture, each without a climate label. The participants were then asked

whether or not they wanted to know the climate information for the products. Thirty-three percent of the participants said no. All of them were then asked to make new choices, where the products now had a label with their CO₂ information.

For those who said yes to the information, there was a 32 percent reduction in the [climate footprint](#) through their new product choices, while the "information avoiders" collectively reduced their footprint by 12 percent after being exposed to the climate labeling.

Hence, the researchers believe that a portion of the information avoiders actively chose to opt out of more information as a way of remaining unknowledgeable—for example to avoid any inner conflict between what they want to do and what they ought to do.

"Our assumption is that being aware of a product's climate impact has a psychological cost for the consumer. If someone who enjoys red meat is informed of its climate impact, it may prompt them to feel a bit of shame or have a guilty conscience. By actively opting out of this information, it becomes less uncomfortable to make a choice that would be seen as a climate sin," explains Associate Professor Nordström, who adds:

"However, if information about the climate impact is forced upon the consumer, some will opt to buy chicken instead of beef, and in so doing, mitigate some of the negative feelings associated with making a decision that has a greater climate consequence. In our experiment, this resulted in a 12 percent lower carbon footprint."

Climate labeling ought to be obligatory

While some Danish supermarkets have begun to inform consumers about the climate effects of their purchasing decisions, there are few products

with labeled CO₂ footprint information. The researchers believe that the study's results can be used as an argument for implementing obligatory climate information on foodstuffs.

"Climate-labeling clearly affects consumers—both those people who are keen to be aware of the climate impact, as well as those who actively seek to ignore this sort of knowledge. The study demonstrates that the latter group can only be affected if they are provided with the information. For climate labeling to be effective, it needs to be obligatory as certain producers of climate threatening products won't voluntarily provide their products with this type of information," says Jonas Nordström.

He adds that the effect could be even greater if there is a simultaneous drive towards informing the public that everyone's contribution is important when it comes to achieving climate goals.

More information: Anna Kristina Edenbrandt et al, Interested, indifferent or active information avoiders of carbon labels: Cognitive dissonance and ascription of responsibility as motivating factors, *Food Policy* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.foodpol.2021.102036](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2021.102036)

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