

Obtaining and Using Industry Data

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Rationale for Collection of Brand Specific Product Information

In 1974, in collaboration with the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute, the Nutrition Coordinating Center (NCC) developed a highly standardized system for collecting and analyzing dietary data (1). This system was initially developed for medical research studies investigating the relationships between diet and cardiovascular diseases. Dietary interviewers for the studies were trained to ask subjects to identify fat containing foods, such as margarine, oil, shortening, cookies and crackers, by brand so that the resulting nutrient calculations would reflect the total fat, fatty acids, and cholesterol content of foods eaten.

We have continued to collect nutrient data for brand name products for the past 17 years to accommodate increasing levels of nutrient specificity required by the studies using the NCC system. We have expanded the system to include specificity for other nutrients of research interest, such as sodium, dietary fiber, sucrose, and a number of vitamins and minerals.

Obtaining Industry Data

Currently, NCC collects brand specific nutrient and serving size information from the food industry for over 6,000 products. To keep pace with a marketplace in which more than 12,000 brand name and fast food products are introduced annually, two nutritionists devote the major portion of their time to obtaining and processing these data. Approximately 350-400 letters are sent to manufacturers each year.

We have a mailing list of manufacturers that has been compiled over the years and which we continually update with new information as needed. The Thomas Food Industry Register (2) is used to identify the names and addresses of manufacturers of many

new products appearing on dietary intake records sent to us by the studies using our services.

An update log has been developed to determine when each manufacturer should be contacted. This log contains information including the specific products of interest, the date of the last update, and the date of the next scheduled update, as well as any special notations which may be made by the nutritionist.

Computer-generated letters and NCC Nutrient Data Forms are sent annually to request updated product information. If the manufacturer does not respond to our letter, we follow up with a second letter or a telephone call to try to obtain the information. If necessary, we will check grocery stores for label information or ask clients in other states to send us information unavailable locally. Canadian clients using the NCC system have been especially helpful in sending us updated information about the Canadian products in our database. On occasion, we purchase products to obtain serving size information that may not be on the label, such as the weight or dimensions of a candy bar or cookie.

Processing of Brand Name Product Data

Until recently, we have stored data received from manufacturers in a paper file. This file contains data for more than 6,000 products. Over the past year we have developed a computerized brand name database in which we can now store data as we receive them from manufacturers. A detailed description of the components of the Brand Name Database is provided elsewhere in these Proceedings (3). Upon receipt of information from a manufacturer, relevant data are entered into the Brand Name Database, and the information is used to update our Nutrient and Food Description Databases.