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**Aim:** The goal of the study was to investigate the use of nutrition information on food labels and understanding of guideline daily amount (GDA) front-of-pack nutrition labels in six European countries. **Subjects and methods:** In-store observations and in-store interviews were conducted in major retailers in the UK (n = 2019), Sweden (n = 1858), France (n = 2337), Germany (n = 1963), Poland (n = 1800) and Hungary (n = 1804), supplemented by questionnaires filled out at home and returned (overall response rate 50.3%). Use of labels was measured by combining in-store observations and in-store interviews on concrete purchases in six product categories. Understanding of GDA front-of-pack nutrition labels was measured by a variety of tasks dealing with conceptual understanding, substantial understanding and health inferences. Demographics, nutrition knowledge and interest in healthy eating were measured as potential determinants. **Results:** Across six product categories, 16.8% of shoppers were found to have looked for nutrition information on the label, with the nutrition grid (table or list), GDA labels and the ingredients list as the main sources consulted and calories, fat and sugar the information most often looked for. Understanding of GDA labels was high in the UK, Sweden and Germany, and more limited in the other countries. Regression analysis showed that, in addition to country-specific differences, use and understanding are also affected by differences in interest in healthy eating and in nutrition knowledge and by social grade. **Conclusion:** Understanding of nutrition information seems to be more widespread than use, suggesting that lack of use is a question of not only understanding, but also motivation. Considerable national differences exist in both understanding and use, some of which may be attributed to different histories of the role of nutrition in the public debate.