Briefing: Traffic Light Nutritional labelling

As a group of organisations dedicated to promoting public health, we urge the UK Government to recommend traffic light labelling is used consistently on front-of-pack across all appropriate products.

Given the high levels of diet-related chronic diseases in the UK today - including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, stroke and diet-related cancer - clear and consistent traffic light labelling on energy, fat, saturated fat sugar and salt is a priority. Colour coded labels help consumers to compare products easily, tell at-a-glance what's in the food they're buying, and enables them to take greater personal responsibility for their food choices.

Nutrition Labelling

Poor diets contribute significantly to the onset of heart disease, type 2 diabetes and some types of cancer. Diets high in fat, sugar and salt and low in fruit and vegetables account for around 30% of all coronary heart disease[1] and 5.5% of all cancers in the UK are linked to excess bodyweight.[2] Being overweight or obese is a major risk factor for these diseases, and obesity levels are increasing across the UK - around a fifth of adults in Wales and a quarter of adults in England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland are obese today.[3]

Front of Pack (FOP) nutritional labelling enables consumers to understand what's in the food they're buying and helps them to take greater personal responsibility for their food choices. Front of pack labelling also incentivises manufacturers to reformulate products for a healthier profile.

Traffic light colours should be a key component of all FOP labels because they help people compare the nutritional content of products at-a-glance. Traffic light labels do not tell consumers which foods are 'good or bad', they simply help us make informed choices.

What food information regulations mean for the UK

The new regulations on The Provision of Food Information to Consumers, approved by the European Parliament in 2011, mean that FOP nutrition labelling remains voluntary in the UK. FOP labels can include energy information only or energy with fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt.

Crucially, this enables UK food manufacturers and retailers to start using, or continue to use FOP labels with traffic light colours. The provision which allows Member States to recommend the use of one or more forms of expression provides a great opportunity for the UK Government

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[1] World Health Organisation (2002) The World Health Report 2002. '*Reducing risks promoting healthy life'*. World Health Organisation. Geneva

[2] Parkin M et al (2011) *'The fraction of cancer attributable to lifestyle and environmental factors in the UK in 2010'* Br J Cancer 105: S1-S1; doi:10.1038/bjc.2011.473

[3] British Heart Foundation Health Promotion Research Group (2012) Coronary heart disease statistics 2012

to promote consistent use – on all products and in all food shops - of the type of labelling that evidence shows is the most helpful for consumers.

Five good reasons why we support labels with traffic light colours

1. Independent research shows that traffic light labels work better than labels which show only Guideline Daily Amounts (GDAs), to enable consumers to assess nutrient levels and to compare between different products.[4] The research shows that consumers prefer FOP labels containing traffic light colours, the words 'high medium and low', and GDAs.
    - In a recent review of the evidence, the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee report on Behaviour Change recognises that not only can traffic light labels aid comprehension of nutritional information, but they can also influence consumers to make healthier choices.[5]

2. Traffic light colours are quick and simple to interpret, and consumers need and want information at-a-glance. Parenting website Netmums found that 79% prefer traffic light labels, with many parents commenting that with limited time to concentrate on food labels the simplicity of traffic light colours made them more useful.[6] A survey by Which? in June 2011[7] also found that seven in ten people thought that traffic light labels were easiest to understand, compared to 23% who thought that the %GDA labels were easiest.

3. Food labelling must not widen dietary inequalities by failing disadvantaged consumers, those who are less numerate or for whom English is not their first language. Critically, traffic light labels performed significantly better than labels without colours across all socio economic groups.[8]
    - Almost half of all adults have difficulty using simple percentages according to the Skills for Life Survey.[9]

4. Front of pack labelling schemes which include only a 'Keyhole' style healthy eating logo or calorie-only labelling fail to provide information on saturated fat, salt and energy. Research shows that consumers want to see this information.[10]
    - High levels of these nutrients in our diets have contributed to the high prevalence of heart disease, type 2 diabetes, stroke and diet-related cancers. Therefore the immediate priority has to be individual nutrient labels - keyhole type logos should only be considered in addition.

5. The differing use of colour in various front of pack schemes has caused confusion for some shoppers. Cool colours (blue or green) used on some percentage GDA schemes[11] are often misinterpreted as indicating that a product is healthy, or low in particular nutrients.[12]

Take the food labelling quiz and find out how traffic light colours help make healthy choices easy choices at www.bhf.org.uk/foodlabelling

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[4] FSA (2009) *'comprehension and use of UK nutrition signpost labelling schemes'* Accessed at http://www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/pmpreport.pdf
[5] House of Lords Science and Technology Committee (2011) *Behaviour Change* p 56
[6] The Great Net Mums Food Survey 2007: Food Labelling. http://www.netmums.com/family-food/healthy-eating/food-activists/the-great-netmums-food-labelling-survey-the-result
[7] An online survey of 1009 members of the GB public, between 14th- 15th June 2011. Weighted to be representative of the GB population. Q. Which do you think is easiest to understand? Base: All who have seen nutritional labels (973)

[8] FSA (2009) *'Comprehension and use of UK nutrition signpost labelling schemes'* www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/pmpreport.pdf
[9] Department for Education and Skills (2003) The Skills for Life Survey. London.
[10] FSA (2009) *'Comprehension and use of UK nutrition signpost labelling schemes'* www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/pmpreport.pdf
[11] Monochrome %GDA schemes and nutrient specific %GDA schemes use different non-traffic light colours to distinguish between different nutrients. The colours used have no meaning in terms of the level of nutrient in the product.
[12] FSA (2009) *'comprehension and use of UK nutrition signpost labelling schemes'*