

Traffic-light food labelling

A position statement

- The front-of-pack 'traffic light' scheme is best for consumers.
- The government should push hard for it to be universally adopted.
- Strong representations should be made to the European authorities to support the scheme.

Implications for public health

Almost two thirds of adults and a third of children are either overweight or obese,¹ and it is estimated that without clear action these figures will rise to almost nine in ten adults and two-thirds of children by 2050.²

Dietary surveys indicate that average intakes of total fat, saturated fat, sugars and salt among the UK population clearly exceed recommended intakes, and that some population groups are eating more than twice the amounts recommended for a healthy diet.³

Clear nutrition signposting on the front of food packaging is an important tool to help people make healthier food choices. It is estimated that most shoppers spend just four to ten seconds choosing each product. Repeated consumer surveys show that people want a single, trusted system of nutritional labelling that uses a consistent approach, wherever they shop, whatever the brand.

The cross-government strategy to tackle obesity in England, points to the responsibility of the food industry to provide consumers with clear and consistent information about the food and drink they consume, and supports the adoption of 'traffic-light' nutritional labelling by retailers and manufacturers.⁴

Traffic-light nutritional signposting and how it is used

Traffic-light labels use red, amber and green signals to show consumers, at-a-glance, whether a product is high, medium or low in fat, saturated fat, sugars and salt (see Fig 1), to help them make healthier food choices by choosing more products with green or amber lights than red. Traffic-light labels are based on core principles developed by the Food Standards Agency (FSA) and are used by a variety of manufacturers and retailers on a wide range of brands and products. The criteria that underpin the labels are based on the dietary recommendations of the Committee on Medical Aspects of Food and Nutrition (COMA)⁵ and its successor, the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN).⁶

The traffic-light labels also enable quick comparisons between similar products. The system is particularly useful on prepared and processed foods such as sandwiches, ready meals, breakfast cereals and processed meat products which often contain unexpectedly high levels of concealed fat, sugars and salt. The UK has the largest market in Europe for ready meals with sales at almost €3 billion in 2006.⁷

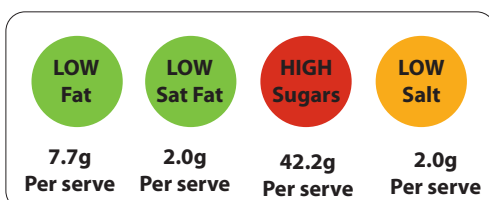


Fig 1: Example of traffic-light nutritional labelling

Food retailers report that traffic-light labels also promote healthy reformulation by manufacturers.⁸ Food companies are using the colour coding as an incentive to reduce fat, sugar and salt levels in their products, wherever possible, to achieve a more healthy profile.



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Traffic lights versus % guideline daily amounts

There are currently a number of different labelling schemes in the UK market. The FSA traffic light scheme has been adopted on a voluntary basis by many large retailers and manufacturers including Waitrose, the Co-op, Sainsbury's, McCain, Boots, and Marks & Spencer. Some other companies including Tesco, Morrisons, Cadbury, Nestlé, Kellogg's and Kraft promote more complex numerical schemes showing percentage guideline daily amounts (%GDAs).

However, these %GDAs schemes create a number of barriers to making healthy choices. First, they may suggest to the consumer that GDAs are daily targets to be aimed at, whereas in fact they are limits not to be exceeded. Second, they give values 'per portion' rather than per 100g or 100ml; and brands often differ in their definition of a 'portion'. Third, the percentage amounts apply only to people of 'average' build - which excludes many consumers. These differences can potentially mislead consumers and make it much more difficult for them to make reliable comparisons between products (and therefore choose the healthier option).⁹

Research has shown that traffic light labels work much better than %GDA labels (or a mix of the two) across all socioeconomic groups. This means that the traffic light scheme is less likely to widen dietary and health inequalities by only being useful to the most numerate or literate consumers.¹⁰

Recommendations

- **The FSA's traffic-light labelling system should be used for front-of-pack labelling.** All schemes adopted by manufacturers and retailers should comply with the FSA's core principles of:
 - ♦ providing separate information on fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt;
 - ♦ using red, amber or green colour coding (traffic lights) to indicate whether levels of these nutrients are high, medium or low;
 - ♦ using nutritional criteria developed by the FSA to determine the colour code;
 - ♦ giving information on the levels of nutrients per portion of product.
- Regulating food labelling is a European competence. This means that the UK government cannot regulate to require traffic light labels on products in UK stores. However, **the UK government should strongly encourage all food manufacturers and retailers to adopt the FSA traffic light scheme.**
- The European Parliament and the Council of Ministers are currently discussing a European Commission proposal for a new Food Information Regulation which updates and simplifies existing rules and puts forward proposals for mandatory nutritional labelling. It is important that **the UK government makes firm representations in Europe in support of the traffic light scheme.**
- **The UK government should also be lobbied to:**
 - ♦ protect and promote the integrity of the FSA traffic light scheme, as a voluntary or (preferably) mandatory scheme in the UK;
 - ♦ ensure that mandatory measures introduced at EU level do not prevent the harmonisation of a front of pack traffic light scheme across Europe in the future.
- **Directors of public health and local authorities should be urged to raise these issues with local retailers and non-governmental organisations.**
- **Health and consumer organisations should be encouraged to:**
 - ♦ support traffic-light labelling;
 - ♦ build and communicate the evidence base for traffic light labelling including research with consumers and analysis of different labelling schemes;
 - ♦ meet and brief national governments, and members of the European Parliament;
 - ♦ support those in other EU countries trying to develop traffic light labelling.

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