

Traffic lights and food labelling: Are we at red, amber or green?

With the rapidly increasing rates of obesity and type 2 diabetes in the UK, the need to encourage healthier dietary choices is not in dispute. Moves to improve food labelling are to be supported. I argue, however, that labelling alone is not enough.

The traffic-light labelling system

When we are driving, what do the three colours at traffic lights tell us?

- Red: stop and wait at the line.
- Red plus amber: stop and wait at the line.
- Green: go, if the way ahead is clear.
- Amber: stop, unless it is unsafe to do so.

So, on three out of four occasions we have been told not to cross the line. Traffic lights may contribute to congestion, but undoubtedly increase safety on our roads. In real life, many of us would want to cross the line, and would stop only if the light was red, thereby disobeying the rules 50% of the time!

In terms of food labelling, the traffic-light system uses the colours red, amber and green to show how much energy, sugar, fat, saturated fats and salt a food contains in each serving. Red means high, amber means medium and green means low. Some of the big supermarkets and food manufacturers show the nutritional information as percentages of the guideline daily amounts for calories, sugar, fat, saturated fats and salt along with the number of grams of each in one serving, and some use a combined approach.

More is needed

Simply labelling a food as unhealthy and asking people not to eat it may not be successful. In the same way that traffic lights discipline us, would we try to rebel against these instructions? Choosing foods labelled green as often as possible and avoiding those labelled red means the consumer would be making much healthier choices. However,

choosing foods with a red traffic light every now and then is fine too. But how often?

Portion control is closely linked to calorie content. Labelling a food as low calorie can inadvertently increase consumption. Could the traffic-light system be seen as overly simplistic?

A way forward

Accidents are much less common at roundabouts than they are at traffic lights. This might indicate that we need to move towards the adoption of the “nudge” approach. Nudge theory has its roots in behavioural psychology and economics and implies that the choices made by individuals and groups can be influenced by positive reinforcement and suggestion. Of course, decision-making behaviour in the population will not alter overnight. The key to changing behaviour is engagement of the individual, families, society and the food industry.

Once a standardised labelling system is implemented, the next step should be to work towards smaller pack sizes and enabling portion control. How many times have you saved part of a packet of crisps or half a chocolate bar to eat later? I look forward to the day when we see 100 mL tubs of ice cream rather than 500 mL, packages containing only six slices of bread or four chocolates, and the end of tins of sweets weighing 1 kg and bumper packs of cookies.

Tesco supermarket joining others in the use of the traffic-light food-labelling system is positive news for consumers, healthcare professionals and organisations that campaign to improve public health (Joule, 2012; page 88 of this issue). The move provides a consistent message and enables consumers to make informed decisions about the food they would like to eat and the impact it might have on their health. It gives a green signal for MPs and the government to support the introduction of a uniform traffic-light food-labelling system across the country. However, it is just a first step in our long journey to reduce the burden of diabetes. ■



Chinnadorai Rajeswaran

Consultant Physician in Diabetes and Endocrinology at Mid Yorkshire NHS Trust, and Chair, National Diabetes Forum.

Joule N (2012) “Green for go” on traffic-light food labelling. *Diabetes in Practice* 1: 88