

How the Government's new food-labelling system could bring healthier outcomes



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The UK Government's decision (Department of Health, 2013) to launch a front-of-pack food-labelling system featuring traffic light colour-coding is, rightly, being seen as an important step to tackle the rising level of obesity and, in turn, type 2 diabetes, which is one of the biggest health challenges that we face.

The Government's scheme now means that all major retailers – including Sainsbury's, Tesco, ASDA, Morrisons, The Co-operative and Waitrose (alongside food manufacturers Mars UK, Nestlé UK, PepsiCo UK, Premier Foods and McCain Foods) – will have food labels on their products that use a traffic light coding system to tell you if the food has high, medium or low amounts of fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt.

According to the Department of Health, businesses that have signed up to using the new label scheme account for more than 60% of the food sold in the UK (Department of Health, 2013). This is a huge change as, up until recently, a mishmash of often confusing labels had been used, and only a few supermarkets – including M&S, Waitrose and Sainsbury's – have used traffic lights.

Food labels will empower people to make healthier choices, but it is also hoped that the use of traffic light colour coding will prompt reformulation from food manufacturers. Evidence submitted by Sainsbury's and ASDA to the House of Lords' Science and Technology Committee indicated that traffic light labelling increases the demand for healthier foods. This may, in turn, encourage manufacturers to make their products healthier to meet this demand.

The Government's announcement follows years of campaigning by health charities, including Diabetes UK. The Food Standards Agency first proposed traffic light food labelling in 2006 (FSA, 2006), but some retailers and supermarkets resisted. Some retailers seemed concerned that red labels might "demonise" particular foods, but the purpose of the scheme is to provide information to help consumers make informed food choices.

Independent evidence shows that the traffic light system helps consumers understand the contents of food and make healthy choices more than labels that only show guideline daily amounts.

Unsurprisingly, the Government's announcement last autumn that they would be recommending a consistent use of a front-of-pack label that incorporates the traffic lights (Department of Health, 2012) was greatly welcomed by health charities, including Diabetes UK, and other campaigners.

Diabetes UK thinks that traffic light labels will be especially beneficial in the following ways.

Prevention of type 2 diabetes

With adult obesity now at record highs, it is essential that people are aware of what is in the foods they eat and are able to know which foods are high in fats, salt and sugar. Almost two-thirds of people in the UK are now overweight or obese. This is a major concern to health campaigners and everyone concerned with public health, as obesity and poor diet are major risk factors for many chronic health conditions, such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease and some cancers.

For type 2 diabetes, obesity is the most potent risk factor. It accounts for 80–85% of the overall risk of developing type 2 and is fuelling the current global growth in the condition (Hunter, 2010).

Indeed, type 2 diabetes accounts for 90% of the 3 million diagnosed cases of diabetes and there are a further estimated 850 000 people who have type 2 diabetes but do not know it. If current trends continue, the APHO diabetes prevalence model estimates that 5 million people will have diabetes by 2025.

Diabetes is the leading causes of blindness in working-age people and is the most common cause of lower limb amputations. The increasing rise of the condition is also one of the reasons for high rates of kidney disease. These complications are not only debilitating but are also very expensive to treat. The NHS spends around £10 billion annually on diabetes, which accounts for around 10% of the

entire NHS budget (Hex et al, 2012). This figure is only going to rise unless we can get much better at preventing type 2 diabetes, and effective food labelling can contribute to this.

The self-management of type 1 and type 2 diabetes

As well as contributing to the prevention of type 2 diabetes, effective front-of-pack food labelling can help people with type 1 and type 2 diabetes manage their condition, as diets high in fat, salt and sugar increase their risk of developing cardiovascular disease.

Ideally, Diabetes UK would also like to see a carbohydrate declaration on all packaged foods. This would help people with diabetes who adjust their insulin according to the amount of carbohydrate they consume as part of their self-management, and so would contribute to the prevention of expensive and life-threatening complications in the short and long term.

Further opportunities

The new traffic light labels will start to appear on the front of food packaging from December 2013. Diabetes UK has been encouraging the Department of Health to take this opportunity to

communicate healthy eating messages and explain how the labels can help people make healthier food choices.

Although the introduction of consistent food labels is a welcome step, there is still a lot more the Government can do if it is truly serious about tackling obesity and preventing type 2 diabetes. Diabetes UK would like to see more focus on the prevention of type 2 diabetes by the new NHS bodies and greater use of the NHS health-check programme to help identify the 7 million people at high risk of the condition and earlier detection of those who have type 2 diabetes and do not know it.

It is also worth pointing out that due to European Union law the Government's traffic light scheme is voluntary. This means that there are still large parts of the food market not covered by traffic light labelling, with multinationals such as Coca-Cola, Cadbury and United Biscuits being among the big names that have not signed up.

This means that opportunities for people to understand what is in the food they buy are still being missed. At Diabetes UK, we want to see all retailers and food manufacturers adopt the recommended labelling scheme and actively promote it as a way for people to make healthier eating choices. ■

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