

# “Green for go” on traffic-light food labelling



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Last month’s announcement by Tesco that it plans to introduce a front-of-pack, “traffic-light” food-labelling system (Diabetes UK, 2012) was a massive victory for health campaigners and consumers alike, and was seen as an important milestone in the effort to reduce the number of people in the UK who are overweight or obese. To the cheer of health charities who have consistently campaigned for better food labelling, the retailer announced it will include traffic-light coding, which tells you at a glance if the food has high, medium or low amounts of fat, saturated fat, sugars and salt, alongside percentage guideline daily amounts (GDAs) on all food labels to enable shoppers to make healthy choices. The move will now bring Tesco in line with Sainsbury’s, Asda and Marks & Spencer, which all use traffic-light colours on their labels, and it means that most front-of-pack nutrition food labels in the UK will now display traffic-light colours. This will bring some much-needed clarity and consistency to UK food shelves, where previously a number of different – often confusing – labels have been used.

Diabetes UK, an organisation working to improve public health and prevent the rise of type 2 diabetes, has long campaigned for the introduction of a single front-of-pack nutrition-labelling scheme including traffic-light colours in the UK. Indeed, in our response to the Department of Health’s (2012) recent consultation on front-of-pack nutrition labelling, we urged the government to recommend a labelling system that includes traffic lights, with the optional addition of percentage GDAs, to be used consistently across all appropriate products to help tackle type 2 diabetes.

Independent evidence has shown that the traffic-light system better helps consumers to understand the contents of food and make healthy choices than labels that only show GDAs (Food Standards Agency, 2009). It is hoped that this will incentivise food retailers to produce more foods that are low in salt, saturated fat and sugar.

Along with physical inactivity, poor diets cause overweight and obesity, which present a significant risk factor for type 2 diabetes and other chronic

conditions such as heart disease and cancer. In fact, obesity accounts for 80–85% of the overall risk of developing type 2 diabetes. Obesity levels are increasing at an alarming rate across the UK – around one-fifth of adults in Wales and a quarter of adults in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland are now obese (Hauner, 2010).

The knock-on effect of this can be seen in the increasing prevalence of type 2 diabetes, which accounts for 90% of all diagnosed cases of diabetes (NICE, 2012). Diabetes now affects around 3.7 million people in the UK, and it is estimated that the numbers of people with diabetes is expected to reach 4.2 million in England by 2025 (Association of Public Health Observatories, 2012). The condition accounts for around 10% of the NHS budget (Hex et al, 2012), and is one of the biggest health challenges we face. If we are to prevent diabetes from overwhelming our health service then more needs to be done to help people make healthier choices, and food labelling has a crucial role in this.

Effective food labelling is also needed to enable people with diabetes (both type 1 and 2) to manage their condition, as diets high in fat, salt and sugar can increase their risk of developing serious complications such as heart disease, stroke, blindness, kidney disease and amputation. We would also like to see a carbohydrate declaration on all packaged food; this information is essential for people with diabetes who adjust their insulin according to the amount of carbohydrate they consume as part of their management of the condition, and so contributes to the prevention of serious health complications.

The hope now is that Tesco’s decision will put pressure on the Government to recommend a single labelling scheme that includes traffic-light colours to all food retailers; the sooner the Government is able to issue a robust recommendation for all food companies to use the single integrated label that includes traffic lights, the sooner people can be empowered to make informed dietary choices and to identify healthier choices at a glance. This is not about telling people what to eat, but empowering them to lead happier and healthier lives. ■

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