Factsheet 1: October 2009

www.food.gov.uk

FRONT OF PACK NUTRITION LABELLING

FOOD STANDARDS AGENCY

Front of pack nutrition labelling schemes: their comprehension and use by consumers in the retail environment and at home

In May 2009, the FSA published the findings of an independent study on the effectiveness of the different front of pack (FOP) nutrition labels being used in the UK marketplace. The full research report (FSA 2009) has been peer-reviewed and published on the Agency's website[1].

Overall conclusions

- The findings of the research provide important new evidence on the effectiveness of various FOP schemes to inform the future direction of Government policy on FOP labelling.
- The strongest FOP labels were found to be those which integrated 3 key elements: text (the words 'high, medium and low'), traffic light (TL) colour coding and percentage of guideline daily amount (GDA) information (Figure 1).
- The coexistence of a number of FOP label formats in the marketplace was found to cause difficulties for consumers which points to the need for a single approach which is effective in helping consumers to make heather choices.

Objectives

FOP labelling is now widespread in the UK with a wide range of products featuring some form of FOP labelling.

In 2007 the Agency commissioned independent research to evaluate the effectiveness of the three main FOP labelling schemes in the UK marketplace. All three schemes include the amount of nutrient in grams per portion of food:

- TL colour coded schemes indicating nutrient level (these can be found with accompanying 'High, Medium and Low' text);
- %GDA schemes providing information on amount of nutrient per portion of product as a percentage of Guideline Daily Amount; and
- Schemes which provide both a TL colour code (with or without text) and %GDA.

Methodology

The research was carried out using an integrated programme of qualitative and quantitative research which addressed the following three questions:

- How well do individual FOP nutrition labelling schemes (or elements of the schemes) enable consumers to correctly interpret levels of key nutrients?
- How do consumers use FOP labels in real life contexts in the retail environment and at home?
- How does the coexistence of a range of FOP nutrition label formats in the marketplace affect accurate interpretation of FOP nutrition labels?

Qualitative and observational work explored how individual FOP nutrition labels were used in practice by shoppers in the retail and home environment. The quantitative work consisted of a representative UK random probability survey of nearly 3,000 main shoppers and assessed the efficacy of FOP nutrition labels, by measuring experimentally their impact upon consumer comprehension under controlled conditions.

[1] http://www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/pmpreport.pdf

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Main findings

- Awareness of FOP labels was found to be high (around 8 in 10 consumers), with higher levels of awareness found in younger consumers and those with children.
- Consumers who used FOP labels valued them. Purchasing decisions were also influenced by a number of other factors such as price, brand loyalty and other packaging sub-brands such as 'healthier option' ranges.
- Those who used FOP labels tended to be those who were generally health conscious, those who purchase food for children, have a particular health concern (e.g. high blood pressure or diabetes) and/or were watching their weight.
- FOP labels were mostly used in-store with in-home use being rare. FOP labels on treats, staple foods, products used in small amounts, ingredients in cooking, or repeat purchases were rarely used by consumers.
- The coexistence of a range of different FOP labels in the market place created considerable difficulty in terms of comprehension for consumers.
- The level of comprehension of FOP labels was generally high (ranging between 58% and 71% in the specific tests used).
- Preference (i.e. *belief* in which label was easiest to understand) was not an indicator of the consumers *ability* to understand the information given in FOP labels in terms of making healthier choices.
- Calories were used and liked with some consumers using them as a proxy for other nutrients.
- A FOP label integrating text (the words 'high, medium and low'), traffic light colour coding and %GDA was perceived to be easy to understand and found to have one of the highest levels of objective comprehension.
- Differing use of colour in the various FOP labelling schemes caused confusion for some consumers. Cool colours (blue or green) used on some %GDA schemes[2] were often interpreted as indicating that the product was healthy or that the product was low in nutrients where cool colours were used. Others did not realise that the colour in the TL scheme (red/amber/green) reflected the level of the nutrients and thought they had been used for aesthetic reasons.
- The level of comprehension of FOP labels for those with lower education levels and those in social classes C2, D and E was found to improve when text (high, medium and low), TL colour coding and %GDA were provided in the FOP label.
- All FOP labels were less easily understood by those over 65 years, those who had lower levels of educational attainment, those who were from social classes C2, D, and E and consumers who self defined as non-white.

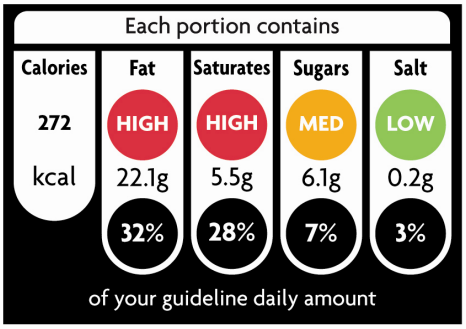

Figure 1. An example of an integrated FOP nutrition label which combines the words 'High, Medium, Low', TL colour coding and %GDA.

[2]Monochrome %GDA schemes and nutrient specific %GDA schemes (this used 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).