

FOOD STANDARDS AGENCY PARLIAMENTARY BRIEFING

March 2006

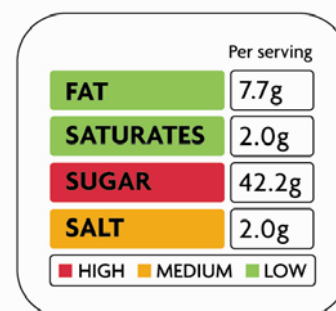
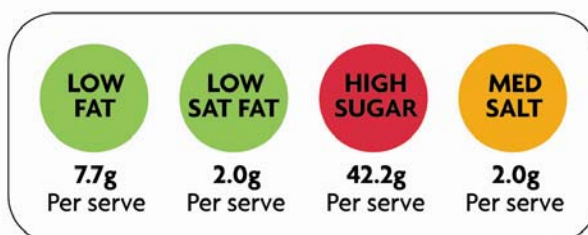
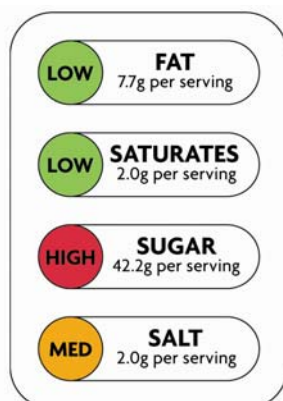
FRONT OF PACK FOOD LABELLING

Making Healthier Choices the Easy Choices

Key points

- The Food Standards Agency's (FSA) Board has agreed a consistent approach for front of pack labelling to make it easier for people to choose a healthier diet
- The FSA's extensive research among consumers tells us that they want a front of pack label that makes it easy to see at a glance information about the key nutrients
- Consumers also want the labelling scheme to be endorsed by an authoritative and independent body such as the FSA
- The FSA is recommending that four core principles should be followed:
 - separate information on four key nutrients of fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt
 - a red, amber or green (traffic-light) colour to indicate whether the levels of each of the four key nutrients are high, medium or low
 - use of nutritional criteria developed by the FSA to determine the colour code
 - information on the levels of nutrients per portion of product
- The agreed FSA core principles will allow supermarkets and manufacturers to develop their own labelling with an individual look and feel that appeals to their shoppers
- The FSA wants all food retailers and manufacturers to adopt this approach to reduce consumer confusion caused by a proliferation of schemes with differing symbols and criteria
- Sainsbury's and Waitrose are already using the recommended colour-coded approach on products and Asda will follow shortly
- The FSA will work with retailers and manufacturers to promote the new labelling to shoppers and to encourage consumers to use the scheme to make healthier choices
- The FSA believes that signpost labelling will encourage consumers to look for and demand healthier products and provide an incentive to business to produce foods that are lower in fat, salt or sugar
- The FSA is recommending that the signpost labelling should be used on foods that consumers eat regularly and find most difficult to assess nutritionally, such as ready meals, breakfast cereals, burgers, sausages, pies, pizzas and sandwiches

Examples of labels that use the core elements of the FSA's proposed signposting scheme



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Background

The Government is committed to a range of initiatives designed to reduce population-wide levels of intake of salt, fats, saturated fats and sugars to recommended levels and in so doing, contribute to reducing the prevalence of diet-related diseases, such as diabetes, coronary heart disease and some cancers.

The commitment to develop a consistent, voluntary scheme giving front of pack nutrition information for consumers was a key element in the FSA's Action Plan on Food Promotions and Children's Diets, agreed in July 2004, and the Public Health White Paper, "Choosing Health", published in November 2004. Both the EFRA Select Committee (in its report of March 2005 on Food Information) and the Health Select Committee (Obesity report of May 2004) also recommended a form of easy-to-use nutrition signpost labelling.

"It is the simplest and clearest way of giving customers the information they are looking for"
Justin King, Chief Executive, Sainsbury's

FSA Research

The FSA's consumer research has found that consumers find the existing nutritional labelling information complex and difficult to understand. They say that they would find it useful to have a front of pack label that provides "at a glance" information relating to the key nutrients they are concerned about.

Since 2004, the FSA has built up an extensive evidence base, developing and testing ideas with consumers directly and with a range of stakeholders.

Over 2,600 consumers were surveyed in June 2005 in one-to-one interviews to test responses to and understanding of possible formats. Two models emerged as best understood by consumers across all socio-economic groups – Multiple Traffic Lights (MTL) and Colour-Coded Guideline Daily Amount (CGDA). The use of **traffic light colours** was shown to be key to helping people understand whether a food has high, medium or low levels of fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt. Research also showed that these two formats were preferred to

numbers-only formats and to a single traffic light, which did not give information about individual nutrients.

Consumers also indicated that they want a consistent approach endorsed by an authoritative, independent and trusted body such as the FSA.

The FSA published its **evidence** and a consultation paper in November 2005. Over 100 responses were received during the consultation period from a broad range of stakeholders – including consumer and public health groups, enforcement bodies, nutrition and dietetic experts, food manufacturers and retailers - and these, along with the consumer research, were considered by the FSA's Board on 9 March.

FSA Board Decision

The FSA Board agreed an approach that has those elements of the MTL and CGDA that are clearly helpful to consumers, while leaving the detailed design of the schemes to individual businesses. The FSA is recommending that industry applies **four core elements** to achieve a consistent scheme. These four core elements are:

- separate information on the key nutrients fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt;
- use of red, amber or green colour coding to provide at a glance information on the level (ie whether high, medium or low) of the individual nutrients in the product;
- provision of information on the levels of nutrients present in a portion of the product;
- use of nutritional criteria developed by the FSA to determine the colour banding.

"The FSA recommendations are flexible enough for all the food industry to adopt"
Sue Davies, Chief Policy Adviser, Which?

Provided these core requirements are met, individual food businesses will be able to develop their own labelling with an individual look and feel that takes account of the values of their own brand.

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The FSA considers that its consistent approach to signpost labelling will deliver three main benefits:

- make it easier for consumers to eat more healthily
- encourage consumers to look for and demand healthier food products
- incentivise businesses to produce foods that are lower in fat, salt or sugar

“Our customers wanted an easy-to-follow, transparent labelling system and traffic light colours, as recommended by the FSA, was their preferred approach”

Christian Cull, Marketing Director, Waitrose

Adoption of FSA Recommendations

Sainsbury's, Asda and Waitrose have already said that they will follow the FSA's recommended approach. Sainsbury's already has a traffic light colour based scheme on its own-brand ready meals, breakfast cereals, pizzas and sandwiches. Waitrose has recently introduced the scheme by applying it to their sandwiches.

The FSA has acknowledged progress made in the last year by a number of food manufacturers and retailers who have introduced their own front of pack schemes. However, this profusion of different symbols, colours and criteria risks consumer confusion and the FSA and a range of consumer groups and public health bodies are urging all

retailers and manufacturers to adopt the FSA's approach.

“The FSA has agreed on the core elements of a traffic light labelling scheme that research shows works really well for busy shoppers”

Sue Dibb, Senior Policy Officer, NCC

Next Steps

The FSA will now work with retailers and manufacturers to promote further take-up of the recommended approach.

In partnership with early adopters of the FSA's front of pack labelling approach, the FSA will develop a communications campaign aimed at consumers to:

- promote understanding and use of the system
- encourage shoppers to use the scheme to make healthier choices, and
- reinforce existing advice about a varied and balanced diet.

The FSA will also explore with stakeholders how best to conduct an independent assessment of the impact of front of pack signpost labelling schemes to identify what works best for all consumers.

“Customers don't want thousands of different types of nutritional labels in their favourite stores”

Sue Malcolm, Nutrition Manager, Asda

Q&A

What evidence is there that consumers want this particular scheme?

An overwhelming majority of consumers (96%) thought a simplified front of pack nutritional signposting scheme would help them make healthier choices. 90% of a sample of 2,600 consumers were able to use signpost labelling options developed by the FSA which had traffic light colours to assess the levels of fat, salt and sugar in individual foods.

Why didn't you include information on GDAs in the core principles?

This information was included in the FSA's consumer research, but the results indicate

that in practice it did not help consumers to assess nutritional quality.

What foods will the scheme apply to?

The research we have undertaken suggests that consumers feel there is the strongest need for a front of pack labelling scheme for processed foods because they find it difficult to determine the nutritional content of these foods. We are proposing that the FSA's front of pack labelling scheme is applied to breakfast cereals, ready meals, burgers, sausages, pies and similar products, processed meat, meat alternatives, poultry and fish based products, pizzas and pre-packed sandwiches.

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Aren't you demonising certain foods?

No. It is the overall balance of the diet that matters. But the increasing complexity of foods and a range of lifestyle factors - including a lack of regular family mealtimes, an increasing reliance on convenience food, demand for food that can be eaten on the go - can make it more difficult than in the past to maintain a healthy balance between fat, sugar and salt and other nutrients. The FSA scheme is about enabling people to improve the balance of their diets. It makes it easy to identify whether foods are high, medium or

low in fats, saturated fats, salt or sugar and whether they should be eaten in moderation.

What happens if manufacturers and retailers don't adopt your system? Will you end up recommending legislation?

We hope it will not come to that. We will continue dialogue with all stakeholders. We have involved stakeholders, including the food industry, in the development of this scheme to ensure that what is finally recommended is a scheme that works and that consumers will find useful.

THIRD PARTY ENDORSEMENT OF THE FSA APPROACH

"We support the use of a labelling system which uses traffic light colours. It is the simplest and clearest way of giving customers the information they are looking for. We launched our own Wheel of Health labelling system, which is in line with the FSA's recommendations, over a year ago...[It] has proved very popular with our customers who tell us it helps them to identify healthier choices at a glance." **Justin King, Chief Executive of Sainsbury's**

"Waitrose and our customers feel that a consistent approach, as proposed by the FSA, will be the best way to allow consumers to make informed decisions about what they eat. Our customers wanted an easy-to-follow, transparent labelling system and traffic light colours – as recommended by the FSA – was their preferred approach." **Christian Cull, Marketing Director of Waitrose**

"Customers don't want thousands of different types of nutritional labels in their favourite stores – that's why we are backing the FSA's proposals to get nutritional information across in a clear, consistent, simple and informative way." **Sue Malcolm, Nutrition Manager of Asda**

"We welcome the FSA's new scheme, which, although watered down, still has the potential to show consumers clearly the health consequences of the food they choose. Backed by a public education campaign, this scheme can lead to a victory for informed consumer choice." **Peter Hollins, Director General of the British Heart Foundation (BHF)**

"The FSA recommendations are flexible enough for all the food industry to adopt. It will help consumers to make more informed choices by showing at a glance whether foods are high, medium or low in fat, sugar or salt." **Sue Davies, Chief Policy Adviser, Which?**

"The FSA has agreed on the core elements of a traffic light labelling scheme that research shows works really well for busy shoppers...But this will only happen if all supermarkets and food manufacturers play ball and adopt all core elements of the FSA's scheme consistently. A range of different labels will confuse shoppers more and do nothing to make healthy choices any easier." **Sue Dibb, National Consumer Council's food expert**

Further information

More information is available on the FSA's website:

<http://www.food.gov.uk/news/newsarchive/2006/mar/signpostnewsarchive>

Or contact FSA public affairs on 020 7276 8823/8839, email: veronica.martell@foodstandards.gsi.gov.uk