

FOOD STANDARDS AGENCY PARLIAMENTARY BRIEFING

November 2005

FRONT OF PACK FOOD LABELLING

Making Healthier Choices the Easy Choices

The Food Standards Agency has launched its final consultation on a front of pack food labelling scheme.

Key points

- **Consumers find nutritional information currently available on food packaging confusing and would welcome a single, consistent front of pack scheme wherever they shop, to help them make healthier choices.**
- **Following extensive consumer research, the Food Standards Agency is inviting views as it considers proposing a Multiple Traffic Light (MTL) scheme on the front of packs so consumers can see at a glance whether a food contains high, medium or low levels of fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt.**
- **On balance the evidence demonstrates that MTL performs best for the majority of consumers at showing the key nutritional characteristics of a food simply and easily.**
- **A system based on Colour-Coded Guided Daily Amounts (CGDA) also performs well and is popular with consumers and so the FSA is inviting views on this option as well. However, CGDA is less well understood.**
- **A Simple or Single Traffic Light (STL) was not liked by consumers and was felt to be too basic.**
- **The FSA is considering proposing that front of pack signposting is introduced initially on foods such as ready meals, breakfast cereals, burgers, sausages, pies, pizzas and sandwiches.**
- **Once a final signposting scheme is agreed, the FSA will be looking to all food retailers and manufacturers to adopt it voluntarily to reduce potential confusion caused by the current proliferation of schemes with differing symbols and criteria.**

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 improve the overall balance of the national diet.

The commitment to develop a single, 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.

The EFRA Select Committee report on Food Information, published in March 2005, and the Health Select Committee report on Obesity of May 2004 also recommended the establishment of an easy-to-use nutrition signposting or traffic light scheme.

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The Agency has been working to develop a front of pack signposting scheme which:

- helps consumers make informed choices and construct a balanced diet;
- allows consumers to quickly and correctly identify whether a product is a healthier option or one high in fat, salt or sugar;
- helps consumers to make comparisons between products, by quickly identifying which is the one lower in fat, salt or sugar and which is higher;
- is easy and clear to understand; and
- is applicable to as wide a range of consumers as possible (particularly with respect to age, socio-economic group and ethnic group).

Food retailers and manufacturers have increasingly responded to consumer demand for simplified nutrition information and a variety of systems are currently in use. FSA-funded research has shown that consumers would prefer a standardised front of pack system, developed and controlled by an independent and authoritative body, such as the FSA. An overwhelming majority of consumers (96%) thought a simplified front of pack nutritional signposting scheme would help them make healthier choices.

The evidence base

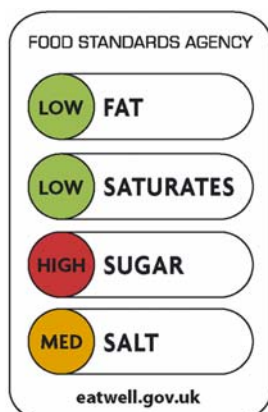
The FSA has developed and extensively tested a number of models. In June this year, interviews were conducted with over 2,600 people to find which of four possible schemes helped the majority of people to identify and choose healthier food options when shopping. The quantitative research was followed up with qualitative work with focus groups across the UK.

Of the four schemes, two - a Multiple Traffic Light (MTL) and a Colour-Coded Guideline Daily Amount based concept (CGDA) – were well-liked and CGDA was the most frequently preferred format. The MTL, however, was most effective in helping consumers make healthier choices. The other two formats – the Single (or Simple) Traffic Light and a monochrome Guideline Daily Amount based concept – were not liked and performed less well.

In particular, the MTL was most effective at helping people across all ages, socio-economic and ethnic groups to assess the key nutritional characteristics of a food.

The CGDA based scheme also performed well, particularly when people were asked to compare the nutritional content of two products. However a third of respondents from lower socio-economic and ethnic minorities groups were unable to use the CGDA to identify whether a food had high, medium or low levels of fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt.

Multiple Traffic Lights



Colour-Coded Guideline Daily Amount

The Colour-Coded Guideline Daily Amount (CGDA) scheme is a table with a legend below it. The table has two columns: 'Per serving' and 'GDA'. The rows are: 'FAT' (7.7g, 70g), 'SATURATES' (2.0g, 20g), 'SUGAR' (42.4g, 90g), and 'SALT' (2.0g, 6g). The legend shows: HIGH (red), MEDIUM (yellow), and LOW (green). The text 'FOOD STANDARDS AGENCY' is at the top and 'eatwell.gov.uk' is at the bottom.

	Per serving	GDA
FAT	7.7g	70g
SATURATES	2.0g	20g
SUGAR	42.4g	90g
SALT	2.0g	6g

■ HIGH ■ MEDIUM ■ LOW

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On balance, therefore, the FSA is considering proposing the Multiple Traffic Light system.

In addition, in the consultation the Agency is also considering recommending that:

- the MTL symbol on the front of the pack should be supported by Guideline Daily Amount information on the back of the pack, as additional information for those who may want it (as recommended by the Institute of Grocery Distribution).
- criteria for front of pack colour coding should be based on proposed EU legislation and expert advice from the advisory committees on nutrition (formerly COMA, the Committee on Medical Aspects of Food, and currently SACN, Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition)
- signposting should be used initially on foods that consumers find difficult to assess the nutritional quality of and which are eaten frequently or in large quantities, eg ready meals, breakfast cereals, burgers, sausages, pies, pizzas and sandwiches.

Next steps

The FSA is consulting widely among industry, public health bodies, consumer groups and members of the public. The 12-week consultation period closes on **8 February 2006**. The Food Standards Agency Board, chaired by Dame Deirdre Hutton, will come to its decision in public at one of the Board's open meetings next year.

Once the signposting system has been agreed, the FSA will be looking to the food retailing and manufacturing sectors to adopt the scheme for the benefit of consumers.

Q&A

The FSA has developed a nutrient profiling model that categorises food – how will this be applied to signposting?

It won't. Nutrient profiling has been specifically developed to support Ofcom's work on the further regulation of broadcast advertising of foods to children. The model is not intended to be used to support on-pack nutritional labelling or to support advice to consumers on how to construct a balanced diet. Further information on nutrient profiling is available on the FSA's website at: <http://www.food.gov.uk/healthiereating/nutlab/>

If the Colour-Coded GDA system was consumers' preferred format, why is the Agency proposing the Multi-Traffic Light system?

Although the respondents preferred the CGDA concept over MTL, the research revealed poor understanding of the term Guideline Daily Amount and many people could therefore not apply the information to their food choices. However, as some people found the CGDA system useful, the FSA is consulting on this approach as well, particularly its use of GDA information on back of pack.

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

We hope it will not come to that. We are continuing our 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.

Further information

Copies of the consultation material are available on the FSA's website: www.food.gov.uk

Direct links: www.food.gov.uk/foodindustry/Consultations/consulteng/signpost2005eng

Qualitative research: www.food.gov.uk/foodlabelling/signposting/refine

Quantitative research: www.food.gov.uk/foodlabelling/signposting/alt

Or contact FSA public affairs on 020 7276 8823/8843, email: veronica.martell@foodstandards.gsi.gov.uk