



choice

CHOICE Principles for a Simplified Nutrition Labelling System

BACKGROUND

In Australia and throughout the world, the incidence of overweight, obesity and diet-related disease is rising alarmingly. A healthy diet is vital in preventing and treating these conditions.

Increasingly, food labels are being used as a vehicle for providing consumers with nutrition information, healthy eating messages, and advice about the potential health benefits of consuming particular foods. Factual nutrition information required by governments and claims made by manufacturers to increase product sales compete for label space and the consumer's attention.

Following international developments in simplified nutrition labelling, some manufacturers in Australia have introduced their own nutrition labelling schemes. There has been considerable public debate about the benefit of these schemes in assisting consumers to make healthy food choices, prompting government authorities to consider the extent to which simplified nutrition labelling should be implemented in Australia.

CHOICE strongly supported the introduction of mandatory nutrition information panels. Nutrition information panels enable consumers to assess the nutrition content of packaged foods and compare products based on the particular nutrients of importance to them.

CHOICE welcomes the development of a simplified nutrition labelling scheme that further assists consumers to identify healthier options and easily distinguishes them from foods that are high in fat, sugar or sodium. CHOICE believes that a scheme offering an element of judgement about the healthiness of individual products would be most helpful in assisting consumers to choose healthier foods. A scheme like this would also provide an incentive for the food industry to reduce the fat, sugar and sodium content of processed foods.

PRINCIPLES

Below is a set of principles that CHOICE believes should underpin a simplified nutrition labelling system.

Development

1. It should be based on scientific criteria developed by independent experts and endorsed by relevant independent health authorities such as the National Health and Medical Research Council.
2. It should be based on independent consumer research, comparing a range of different options. International research may provide guidance on the range of potential nutrition labelling schemes however research must be conducted on Australian consumers to ensure that it is useful for the Australian population.
3. It should be developed in consultation with industry, consumers, health experts, enforcement agencies and communications experts.

Consumer benefit

4. It should be simple and as easily understood by the majority of consumers including those who may find nutrition information panels difficult to understand.
5. It should complement, not replace, nutrition information panels currently on the back or side of packs. This does not exclude possible refinement of the current nutrition information panel.
6. To avoid consumer confusion, there should be only one agreed nutrition labelling program rather than a variety of initiatives across the food industry.
7. It should be mandatory on all packaged foods and for fast food chains with standard menu items, recipes and processes.
8. It should enable consumers to make comparisons between different products within the same food category as well as across different food categories.

Information

9. It should address only those nutrients of greatest public health significance such as energy, total fat, saturated fat, sugar, sodium and fibre. It should not include information about nutrients of lesser significance such as carbohydrates, protein, and other vitamins and minerals as too many fields may confuse consumers and draw attention away from the nutrients of greatest public health significance.

10. It should require all products to list information for all agreed nutrients. It should not allow manufacturers to display only those nutrients that present a product most favourably. For example, providing information on energy content alone is potentially misleading as it is important for consumers to know the source of kilojoules - such as fats or sugars.
11. To enable consumers to make assessments at a glance, it should include an interpretive element such as traffic light colours and/or high/medium/low indicators depending on the levels of key nutrients in each product.
12. Ideally, there should be a single set of criteria applied across all food categories or two separate sets of criteria developed for solid foods and drinks or liquid foods. However, consumer research may indicate that it would be more appropriate to have separate criteria for a range of food categories.
13. It may also include factual information such as the contribution to an average consumer's daily intake of key nutrients or the amount of each key nutrient per 100g/ml. Guidance should be given about appropriate serving sizes to prevent manipulation of serving sizes designed to present nutrition information in the most favourable way.

Government support

14. It should be accompanied by a government consumer education and health promotion campaign on healthy eating and how to use food labels to make healthy food choices.
15. It should be easily enforced. Government funding should be allocated to monitor and enforce the simplified nutrition labelling scheme.