

## Food labelling scheme agreed with retailers to remain voluntary

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The UK government says it is confident all supermarkets will adopt a clearer, front-of-pack food labelling system by the summer of 2013 to help consumers choose healthier products.

But among health experts welcoming the announcement one leading food policy academic criticised the “absurd” decision by ministers to opt for a voluntary scheme.

Tim Lang, professor of food policy at City University London, said that although the new labelling system should “bring some order” out of chaos, action should have been taken long before now to enforce compliance across the food industry.

“For years, nutrition labelling has been a mess but a deliberate mess. Government allowed powerful players in the food industry to resist introducing the scheme that consumers liked best and understood most easily, namely traffic lights,” he said.

The new scheme, which is intended to replace a “confusing” variety of information, symbols, and labels used by retailers, was announced by public health minister Anna Soubry on 24 October.

She said that after consulting widely with retailers, manufacturers, and other parties there would be a “consistent” labelling system designed to show how much fat, saturated fat, salt, sugar, and calories food products contained.

Currently, consumers can come across different types of food labels in different stores. Some of these use colour-coded traffic lights—with red denoting the least “healthy” foods and green the most “healthy”—while others favour guideline daily amounts (GDAs), or use the two together.

The government said it favours a “hybrid” scheme that is consistently adopted and will be clearly understood. It combines colour coding, GDAs, and use of the words “high, medium, and low” to present nutritional values. Some presentational details are still to be agreed.

Soubry said the UK already had the largest number of products with front-of-pack labels in Europe but research had shown that the wide variety of labels used confused consumers.

She said, “By having a consistent system we will all be able to see at a glance what is in our food. This will help us all choose healthier options and control our calorie intake.

“Obesity and poor diet cost the NHS billions of pounds every year. Making small changes to our diet can have a big impact on our health and could stop us getting serious illnesses—such as heart disease—later in life.”

Lang said the “announcement that we are to get some coherence and merger of traffic lights and GDAs at least should provide consumers with a unified labelling scheme.”

But he said, “It is ridiculous that this is to remain voluntary. What have food manufacturers and retailers to fear? Why does it take so long to get what the politicians say they want—a well educated consumer using clear labelling to make informed choices?”

John Middleton, vice president for policy at the Faculty of Public Health, said enabling people to make healthy choices when buying food would help to tackle obesity, which cost the NHS around £4bn (£4.9bn; \$6.4bn) a year to treat.

He said, “The detail of the scheme will be crucial, and the criteria for traffic light labelling will need to be robust. We await the implementation of the scheme with great interest, and hope that all food manufacturers see the benefits and take it up.”

Helen Davidson, chairwoman of the British Dietetic Association, said, “Consumers need a quick understanding of the relative healthiness of a product. This is a significant step forward.”

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