

NUTRITION LABELLING

When you begin working as a pharmacist some of the products you work with may have nutrition labels and patients may have questions about these. It is good to have a basic understanding so that you can advise patients appropriately. Pamela Mason discusses different types of nutrition labelling in use

Pamela Mason is a freelance journalist and author based in Monmouthshire

For personal use only. Not to be reproduced without permission of the editor (permissions@pharmj.org.uk)

Labels on foods have long been a source of confusion for consumers. Food labelling is regulated by legislation that requires all pre-packaged food to be labelled with the name of the product, the weight, a list of the ingredients, a use-by or best-before date, the name of the manufacturer and a batch number. However, what has been the subject of more recent debate is nutrition labelling, which should be distinguished from food labelling. All nutrition labelling in the UK is voluntary unless a nutritional claim is made. For example, if a product claims to be “low in fat”, the corresponding nutritional information (eg, amount of fat per 100g) must be provided to justify the claim.

Surveys show that people would like to understand better what their food contains. Moreover, with the increase in the number of people who are overweight and the health risks of high intakes of saturated fat, sugar and salt, it is important that people have easily applicable information to balance their diets appropriately.

In 2004, the Government announced its commitment to developing a new nutrition labelling scheme for the front of food packaging, known as a signposting scheme. Front of pack signposting is an additional voluntary scheme aimed to make it easier for people to choose a healthy diet by providing at-a-glance information about the fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt in food. This seemed to be a good idea and two schemes, the multiple

traffic light scheme and the guideline daily amounts (GDA) scheme, were developed and are now running in parallel.

Multiple traffic lights

The traffic light scheme has been developed by the Food Standards Agency (FSA), an independent Government department established to protect public health and consumer interests in relation to food. Under this system, food is deemed red, amber or green for four ingredients: fat, saturated fat, sugars and salt. Criteria for determining whether a product is high, medium or low in each of these nutrients have been established by the FSA (see Panel 1).

In developing this scheme, the FSA proposed that that it should initially be used on a limited range of processed foods. These are foods with which, according to research, consumers have particular difficulty in assessing the nutritional content and which tend to be eaten frequently or in large quantities. Such foods include “ready meals”, pizzas, sandwiches, breakfast cereals, burgers, pies, sausages and food products in breadcrumbs, such as chicken nuggets and fish fingers. However, there is strong interest in extending traffic light signposting to other processed foods whose intake should be limited and those eaten as “treats” (eg, confectionery and crisps).

The traffic light scheme has been adopted by various food retailers (eg,

Asda, Budgens, the Co-op, Marks & Spencer, Sainsburys and Waitrose), and several food companies (eg, Avondale, Bombay Halwa, Britannia, McCain, Moy Park, New Covent Garden and S&B Herba). It is also supported by the British Dietetic Association, the British Heart Foundation, Diabetes UK, the National Consumer Council, the National Heart Forum and the Royal College of Physicians.

Guideline daily amounts

The GDA approach has been developed by the Food and Drink Federation, a body that represents the UK food and drinks manufacturing industry. The system gives details of calories, fat, saturated fat, sugars and salt in an adult portion of a product, in terms of total amounts and as a percentage of the GDA. The GDA values were developed by the Institute of Grocery Distribution (IGD (see Panel 2).

Each of the five components can be presented differently, depending on the manufacturer. For example, some Tesco products use a blue symbol for fat, lighter blue for saturated fat, pink for sugar and orange for salt. The colour identifies the nutrient and does not change if the food is high, medium or low in the nutrient.

Other supermarkets have chosen a monochrome presentation. In fact, there are a number of variations using GDAs. In addition, not all foods from the same producer are labelled in the same way — often it will depend on whether

or not the packaging has been updated and the product type.

The GDA system is supported by a number of manufacturers (eg, Coca-Cola, Danone, Kellogg's, Kraft, Masterfood, Nestlé, PepsiCo, Tate & Lyle and Walkers) and retailers (eg, Tesco and Morrisons). Marks & Spencer is currently using both schemes. For example, it has used a monochrome label on the back of packaging which includes information about protein, carbohydrate and fibre.

Pros and cons of each system

Neither scheme is perfect. Both traffic light and GDA labelling have their merits, but having two schemes running at once is likely to confuse consumers. Indeed, independent research conducted before the availability of products with signpost labelling suggested that consumers would find it confusing if different front of pack labelling schemes were used. Consumer research by the Food Standards Agency and Which? has explored people's understanding of, and preferences for, a range of signposting formats. It indicated that colour coding is key for consumers — all colour coded systems work well, including the traffic light scheme and a colour coded version of the GDA labelling system. Overall, consumers said they preferred set colours linked to low, medium and high levels of nutrients. Of particular note is the fact that people in low income groups tend to have poorer diets and, according to the research, these people find the

traffic light scheme the easiest to understand.

Front of pack signposting should help consumers to make better food choices and eat healthier diets. However, it is difficult to design a simple system that defines a product as healthy or less healthy. In addition, the GDA scheme has been criticised on the grounds that consumers may interpret GDAs as targets for nutrient intake to reach each day, rather than the ceilings for intake they are intended to be. In other words, some consumers might think that they need 70g of fat and 90g of sugar each day, rather than interpreting these as approximate maximum intakes. Another issue with multiple traffic light signposting is the comparison of a product with, for instance, two red codes for fat and sugar, an amber code for saturated fat and a green code for salt, with a product that has amber codes for all four nutrients. However, research suggests that people seem to extract the information they want. For example, a person can look for products with green fat codes if he or she is concerned about fat intake, and may be less concerned if the same product is labelled red for sugar.

The traffic light scheme defines nutrients per 100g while the GDA system defines them in a single portion. Defining nutrient content in 100g of food makes it easier to compare products, while defining nutrient content in a portion helps define the nutrient content of what is eaten, but only if the portion size is realistic. Anecdotally, consumers sometimes say

that portion sizes are unrealistically small (eg, that a packet is actually suitable for only two people, rather than the four portions identified on the label).

Conclusion

It seems a good idea to encourage and make it easier for people to make informed choices about healthy eating. However, the fact that there are two schemes running can only add to consumer confusion. In addition, how much front of pack signposting will influence food choice and shopping habits is not yet known, but results of research by the FSA should be available in 2008. Eventually, one of the two signposting schemes may become the accepted method of food labelling. Whichever scheme is adopted, people will need educating on how to use it. This is an opportunity for you, when you start practising, to help people interpret nutrition labels and to discuss healthy eating with customers. In the meantime, if you want to discuss issues that are diet-related, such as weight loss, diabetes and cardiovascular disease, you need to be able to explain both signposting systems to those who ask. It is also important to emphasise general healthy eating advice. ■

Further information

- Information on traffic light labelling can be found at: www.eatwell.gov.uk/foodlabels/trafficlights.
- Information on the guideline daily amount scheme can be found at: www.whatsinsideguide.com and www.igd.com.

Panel 1: FSA bands for traffic light labelling				Panel 2: Guideline daily amounts for a typical adult	
Ingredient	Low (green)	Medium (amber)	High (red)		
Fat (g per 100g food)	0–3	3–20	> 20	Energy (kcal)	2,000
Saturated fat (g per 100g food)	0–1.5	1.5–5	> 5	Fat (g)	70
Total sugars (g per 100g food)	0–5	5–15	> 15	Saturated fat (g)	20
Salt (g per 100g food)	0–0.3	0.3–1.5	> 1.5	Sugars (g)	90
				Salt (g)	6