

# Traffic light labelling – helping people make healthy choices

## World Cancer Research Fund UK position statement

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**World Cancer Research Fund UK wants to see all food retailers and manufacturers include harmonised/standardised traffic light labels on the front of food packaging.**

**Unhealthy diet, overweight and obesity are major preventable risk factors for many types of cancer. Improved front-of-pack labelling helps people make informed and healthy choices, and will complement other efforts to tackle the obesity and non-communicable disease epidemic including cancer.**

**There is a significant body of national and international research that favours the use of traffic light labels as the most effective and user-friendly way to communicate nutrition information. This includes independent research commissioned by the Food Standards Agency.**

**A simple and consistent traffic light scheme should include three key elements - green, amber and red colour coding, with % GDAs<sup>1</sup> and, ideally, the inclusion of 'low', 'medium' or 'high' text.**

**Adoption of a harmonised traffic light scheme would reduce confusion among consumers.**

## Public health relevance

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The latest *Health Survey for England* data from 2010 show that in England almost three quarters of adults and a third of children were overweight or obese<sup>2</sup>. It has been estimated that without clear government policies to address unhealthy diets, along with other lifestyle factors such as physical activity, these figures will rise to almost nine in every ten adults and two-thirds of children by 2050<sup>3</sup>.

Levels of chronic, non-communicable diseases (including cancer, cardiovascular diseases and diabetes) are also on the rise throughout the UK, and unhealthy diet is one of the major risk factors. In the UK in 2008, 309,189 cases of cancer were diagnosed<sup>4</sup>. Overall scientists estimate that about a third (37%) of 12 of the most common cancers in the UK could be prevented through improved diet, physical activity and maintaining a healthy body weight<sup>5</sup>.

Representative dietary surveys clearly indicate that intakes of total fat, saturated fat, sugars and salt significantly exceed recommended levels, while fruit and vegetable consumption is far below the Government's five-a-day recommendation<sup>6</sup>. Such imbalance is due in large part to the fact that we are consuming too many energy-dense and processed foods that are high in fat, salt and sugars.

Unhealthy diet, especially the excessive consumption of energy-dense foods, is strongly associated with obesity and being overweight. This is a major risk factor for different cancer types (including bowel, pancreas, kidney and breast [post-menopausal]). Often people are unaware of the amount of calories they are consuming and find it difficult to identify healthy options, particularly when choosing between highly processed convenience foods.

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<sup>1</sup> Percentage guideline daily amounts

<sup>2</sup> Health Survey for England, 2010

<sup>3</sup> Tackling Obesity: Future Choices, Department of Innovation, 2010

<sup>4</sup> Office for National Statistics; Welsh Cancer Surveillance and Intelligence Unit; Information Services Division Scotland; Northern Ireland Cancer Registry.

<sup>5</sup> WCRF/AICR Preventability Estimates, in *Policy and Action for Cancer Prevention* (2009)

<sup>6</sup> National Diet and Nutrition Survey: Headline Results, 2011

This is why WCRF UK believes that one of the key measures needed to make it easier to eat healthily is clear, consistent and easy to understand front-of-pack nutrition labelling. This will enable consumers to quickly and accurately assess the levels of key nutrients in their foods so that they can make an informed choice.

## The traffic light system

### Summary of arguments in favour of traffic light scheme

- Research shows it is the best-performing scheme
- It works at a glance
- It can work on a 'per 100g' rather than a 'per portion' basis
- It helps consumers to interpret %GDAs
- It drives the reformulation of food products (to reduce salt, sugar and saturated fat content)
- All consumers are able to understand the nutrient information
- There is public support for this approach with public health community and consumer groups backing the scheme

Traffic light labels use green, amber and red signals to show consumers whether a product is high, medium or low in fat, saturated fat, salt, sugar and, ideally, energy (in calories). The colour codes act as signpost that consumers can use, at a glance, to identify healthier options and to make quick comparisons between similar products. Traffic lights do not tell people that foods are 'good' or 'bad', they simply help people to make informed choices and ensure they have a healthy and balanced food basket.



The traffic light system has consistently come out top in terms of consumer *preference* (easiest to use) and *performance* (enable people to identify healthier choices)<sup>7</sup>. They have been found to be particularly useful when provided on ready prepared and processed foods such as sandwiches, ready meals, breakfast cereals and processed meat products which often contain unexpectedly high levels of fat, sugars and salt. This is particularly important as the UK has the largest market in Europe for ready meals with sales at almost £1.74 billion in 2011<sup>8</sup>.

The best traffic light scheme has been found to consist of three key elements:

- ▶ Traffic light colour coding for high, medium and low levels of nutrients
- ▶ Text denoting 'high', 'medium, and 'low'
- ▶ % GDAs

The traffic light (colour coding) thresholds should be applied on a 'per 100g' basis, which would allow consumers to accurately compare the nutritional profile of different products. The exact amount of each nutrient should be communicated per portion along with %GDAs. However, it is important to recognise that portion sizes vary significantly between manufacturers and retailers and rarely reflect the portions that are actually consumed, which can be misleading – this is why it is important to have the traffic lights on a per 100g basis. Portion sizes need to be more realistic and consistent before they can be used in isolation.

<sup>7</sup> FSA (2009) 'comprehension and use of UK nutrition signpost labelling schemes' <http://www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/pmpreport.pdf>; European Heart Network (2007) 'Review of 'Front of Pack' Nutrition Schemes'; Food Safety Authority Ireland (2009) 'Research into consumers' attitude to food labelling'

<sup>8</sup> Ready Meals Market Report 2011, <http://www.keynote.co.uk/market-intelligence/view/product/10473/ready-meals>

## Success in practice

Five of the UK's leading supermarkets have been using traffic lights successfully for some years on their own-brand products (see Table 1), and surveys of consumer purchasing behaviour have found that traffic lights can encourage shifts to healthier products; help consumers to interpret %GDAs; and, push supermarkets to reformulate their products<sup>9</sup>. Retailers using the traffic light scheme have reported that it simply encourages people to change the type of products they buy (largely within food categories), rather than stopping them buying products full stop – as such there is unlikely to be any loss of sales.

Government backing for harmonised/standardised traffic light labels on the front of food packaging provides a good opportunity to 'nudge' the food industry to reformulate their products (to reduce salt, sugar and saturated fat content). The criteria for establishing traffic light thresholds have been developed by the Food Standards Agency and are underpinned by Government-endorsed dietary recommendations<sup>10</sup>.

Importantly, research has shown that the traffic light scheme is more accessible and easier to interpret for all consumers, particularly those from lower socio-economic groups. This is important as overweight and obesity hit these groups hardest<sup>11</sup>.

The use of %GDAs alone, on the other hand, is not backed by robust evidence and the scheme did not perform well with people from lower socio-economic groups<sup>12</sup>. Those supermarkets that have adopted the GDA scheme in isolation have not produced any quality evidence to demonstrate that this system outperforms traffic light labelling in enabling consumers to accurately assess the nutritional content of foods and to compare between products. On the contrary, the use of differing colours (cool shades, for example) has resulted in confusion and misinterpretation<sup>13</sup>.

Similarly, when given alone, energy values or healthy option logos fail to provide sufficient information on the different nutrients for consumers to make a balanced choice<sup>14</sup>. These can be effectively combined with traffic light labels to give more complete information.

**Table 1: Overview of current labeling practices in UK**

Supermarket	Using Traffic Lights?	Using %GDAs?	Using text?
<b>Tesco</b>	No	Yes	No
<b>Asda</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Sainsbury's</b>	Yes	No	No
<b>Morrisons</b>	No	Yes	No
<b>The Cooperative</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>M&amp;S</b>	Yes	Yes	No
<b>Waitrose</b>	Yes	Yes	No
<b>Aldi</b>	No	Yes	No
<b>Lidl</b>	No	Yes	No

<sup>9</sup> FSA (2009) 'comprehension and use of UK nutrition signpost labelling schemes' <http://www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/pmpreport.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Committee on Medical Aspects of Food, *Dietary Reference Values for Food Energy and Nutrients*, 1991

<sup>11</sup> FSA (2009) 'comprehension and use of UK nutrition signpost labelling schemes' <http://www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/pmpreport.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> FSA (2009) 'comprehension and use of UK nutrition signpost labelling schemes' <http://www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/pmpreport.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> FSA (2009) 'comprehension and use of UK nutrition signpost labelling schemes' <http://www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/pmpreport.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> FSA (2009) 'Comprehension and use of UK nutrition signpost labelling schemes' <http://www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/pmpreport.pdf>