

How do front-of-pack food labels help us make healthier choices?



Choosing healthy options at the supermarket can be difficult. There are many products to choose from, and the advertising on packs can make it hard to tell which ones are healthy choices. In addition, shoppers are often in a hurry and reading the nutrition information panel on the back of products can be time consuming and confusing. Interpretive nutrition information on the front of food packs has the potential to help consumers quickly and easily compare between options to choose a healthy alternative.

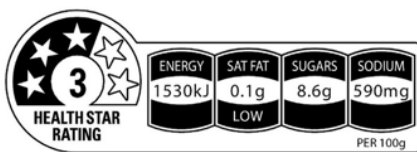
WHAT WE DID

The research involved more than 4,000 Australians. It investigated the relative benefits of different kinds of front-of-pack nutrition labels. The three different labels used in the studies were the Daily Intake Guide, the Health Star Rating, and the Multiple Traffic Lights.

Daily Intake Guide



Health Star Rating



Multiple Traffic Lights

1 cup of cereal (30g) contains



The studies explored consumers' reactions to labels that can be placed on the front of packs to provide nutrition information at a glance.

The studies examined which labels were (i) the most preferred, (ii) more effective in helping consumers identify healthier options, (iii) more effective in actually modifying consumers' food choices, and (iv) more likely to motivate consumers to prioritise healthiness over price.

WHAT WE FOUND

When asked to nominate which of the three labels they preferred, the Health Star Rating was found to be the most popular. This was mainly attributed to the label's overall summary of a product's healthiness in the form of a star scale that ranges from half a star to 5 stars. The second most preferred label was the Multiple Traffic Lights. The Daily Intake Guide was preferred by only a small minority of respondents.

When asked to rate foods according to healthiness, the study participants were best able to do so when using the Health Star Rating compared to when using the Multiple Traffic Lights or the Daily Intake Guide labels. This was the case across all four food categories included in the studies: breakfast cereals, cookies, pizzas, and yoghurts.

Survey respondents were asked to choose between products within each food category that differed in terms of their healthiness and price. They were most likely to choose the healthiest alternative (e.g., the healthiest pizza from a range of pizzas) when the Health Star Rating label was present in comparison to when the other two labels were present or no label was present. They were also willing to pay more to purchase healthier versions of foods when the Health Star Rating was on the pack. There were no differences in the amount consumers were willing to pay for healthy or less healthy foods when presented with the other two labels.

Nutrition and health claims are another type of nutrition labelling that is often displayed on the front of food packs. These claims describe nutrient content such as 'reduced saturated fat' or health benefits of a product, such as 'high in calcium for strong bones'. They can be persuasive for consumers because they create positive expectations about the healthiness and quality of the product. However, they can be misleading because they focus on a small number of positive product attributes and ignore any unhealthy aspects. **The research found that consumers could make more accurate assessments of product healthiness when the products featured a claim if the Health Star Rating was also present to correct any misperceptions created by the claim.** By comparison, discrepancies between a claim and nutrition label were less likely to be noticed when the Daily Intake Guide or Multiple Traffic Lights labels were present.

WHAT THIS MEANS

Overall, the research found that the Health Star Rating is a useful tool for helping consumers make healthier food choices, and that it is substantially more effective in doing so than the other labelling systems such as the Daily Intake Guide and the Multiple Traffic Lights.

Talati Z, Pettigrew S, Hughes C, Dixon H, Kelly B, Ball K and Miller C. The combined effect of front-of-pack nutrition labels and health claims on consumers' evaluation of food products. *Food Quality and Preference*. 2016;53:57-65. Talati Z, Norman R, Pettigrew S, Neal B, Kelly B, Dixon H, Ball K, Miller C and Shilton T. The impact of interpretive and reductive front-of-pack labels on food choice and willingness to pay. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*. 2017;14:171

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