

Front-of-pack labels for packaged food

WHAT IS IT?

Prominent labels on the front of packaged food containers that use a simple graphic to indicate if an item meets certain nutrition standards.

There are multiple types, but interpretive labels that clearly warn consumers of items that are high in sugar, salt and saturated fat are most effective in guiding consumers to healthier items.⁴

FRONT OF PACK WARNING LABELS IN CHILE



Chile has been a pioneer in implementing front-of-pack warning labels for packaged food, requiring black octagonal warning levels on packaged foods that exceed the limit of sugar, salt, saturated fat or calories. Products with labels cannot be purchased by schools or marketed to children, and stronger limits were phased in over a 3 year period. The road to implementation was not easy, however, due to major opposition from industry. Though first proposed in 2007, legislation was not passed until 2012. Even then, challenges from industry delayed implementation until 2016. Preliminary results indicate that labels have resulted in reformulations of products by manufacturers.⁵

RATIONALE

- Clearly highlights products with high levels of unhealthy ingredients. These labels are easily understandable and impossible to miss
- Drives product reformulation as companies do not want products to be clearly labeled as unhealthy
- Can link to government nutrition standards and rules for marketing to children. Products with warning labels cannot be marketed or purchased for/by institutions
- Nutrient content information on the back of products is hard for most consumers to interpret

HOW TO IMPLEMENT

1. Determine best interpretative front-of-pack label
 - Consider best practice examples
 - Test labels with consumers to ensure they are effective and understandable
 - If regulatory process will be slow, consider starting with voluntary labeling scheme
2. Determine nutrient standard to use as the basis for the labeling. There are existing standards that can be used as a reference
3. Conduct media campaign to inform consumers
4. Draft regulations to include front-of-pack labeling as part of mandatory nutrition labeling
5. Implement comprehensive labeling policies; integrate with government nutrition standards to support products that meet highest standards
6. Monitor and evaluate policy; develop transparent process for publicly reporting on compliance with labeling, and consumer acceptance and use

WHAT IS NEEDED

- Strong government leadership from high level officials
- Advocacy and support by civil society, researchers, and scientific associations to counter industry opposition
- Coordination among government agencies to integrate labeling into government procurement and policy setting
- Staff to convene scientific researchers, nutritionists, communications experts and other public officials to set the standards for the warning labels and graphic designer to design the labels/logos
- Support to monitor implementation and determine impact of labeling

WHERE HAS THIS BEEN IMPLEMENTED

- Chile's mandatory front of pack labeling program requires packaged foods to use black octagons on the front of packaged foods if they are high in salt, sugar, saturated fat or calories. Chile's policy is linked to its school food standards, preventing school from buying items with one or more warning labels.¹¹
- Finland implemented a mandatory "high salt" warning label in 1993 for select food categories; as a result of multiple interventions on salt, there was an observed reduction of about 15% in average salt intake between 1979 and 2007.⁸

