

Front-of-package labeling systems

Only one system is proven to improve food choices: Mandatory nutrient warning labels

Front-of-package labels are a powerful tool to improve nutrition and prevent heart disease and stroke through reduction of salt, fat, and sugar intake.

Effective front-of-package labels are simple, easy to understand, and discourage consumers from unhealthy choices. Well-implemented front-of-package warning labels backed by a strong nutrient profile model based on WHO dietary intake goals result in large reductions in the consumption of unhealthy foods, drive manufacturers to reformulate their products and lead to healthier consumer choices - particularly when paired with restrictions on marketing, public procurement and service, and taxation of unhealthy products.

Black nutrient warning labels (usually octagonal or triangular) consistently outperform all other label types. Various front-of-package labeling systems (e.g., traffic lights, Nutri-Score, warning labels) have been implemented globally, either on a voluntary or mandatory basis. Mandatory front-of-package nutrient warning labels help consumers identify harmful products, reducing purchases of harmful foods and increasing purchases of healthier foods.¹⁻¹¹



Figure: Excess sodium, excess sugar, and excess saturated fat labels used in Mexico.

Countries that have adopted nutrient warnings have seen measurable improvements in nutrition.

In Chile, warning labels led to a 14% reduction in sodium in purchased products, a 20% reduction in sugar and a 10% reduction in saturated fat three years after policy implementation. Chile's policy was also effective at driving industry reformulation: The proportion of foods and beverages requiring a nutrient warning label decreased from 71% to 53% after the latest implementation phase, and the levels of critical nutrients declined across all categories.¹²⁻¹⁵ Evaluations of other countries that have implemented a warning label system indicate healthier choices after implementation;^{16,17} industry reformulates to make products healthier and consumers understand and use the warning labels to improve food choices.¹⁸⁻²¹

There is no real-world evaluation data showing that any system other than black nutrient warning labels improves consumer purchasing choices.

Warning labels empower consumers. Elevating the voices of consumers over industry is important. Young adults report that warning labels on beverages gave them more control over purchasing decisions and described the symbols as either "about right" or "not harsh enough".²² In Uruguay, parents interviewed two years after warning labels were implemented said the labels were easy to understand and helped them make informed choices about their food purchases.²³

Warning labels promote health equity. Effective labeling is a health equity issue; it is critical to implement a model that works for all socio-economic and education levels.²⁴ Groups spanning educational and socioeconomic levels and those with poor health conditions better understand warnings labels than other labeling schemes.^{4,25,26} Models preferred by industry, including traffic light labels and guideline daily amounts, are not well understood by consumers, particularly people with less formal education.²⁵

Warning labels are cost-effective: Warning labels are a cost-saving measure. For example, a modeling study in Mexico shows that these labels could save 1.8 billion USD, and a study in Barbados shows the potential of such labels to avert 16% of the deaths caused by noncommunicable diseases and save the country USD 732.8 million.^{27,28} Further, reports from Chile demonstrate that the policy did not create an economic burden to manufacturers and any costs incurred by industry have the potential to be outweighed by the savings in healthcare costs; the policy also did not increase the price of food, nor cause any reductions in employment or average wages in the food and beverage sector.²⁹

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