

Traffic-lights food labelling gets the green light in the UK

Earlier this month, the Department of Health launched a new labelling system for food. The on-the-packet label grades food as red, amber or green– the colours displayed by traffic lights. Foods with 'green' indicators are healthier than those with 'red' ones. The system shows how much fat, salt and sugar is in each product, and it is claimed, allows shoppers to compare products directly against one another. But will it really make it easier for consumers to make healthier choices about the foods they eat?

The launch comes after years of debate about food-labelling between companies, supermarkets, the government, health associations and consumer groups. Customers, it was found, are confused when more than one scheme is used.

Now, all the major UK supermarkets (Tesco, Sainsbury's, Asda and Morrisons) have agreed to use the label on their products. Companies such as Mars UK, Nestle UK and PepsiCo UK will join in.

The UK has high levels of diet-related diseases, such as heart disease. 61% of the adult population in England is overweight or obese – one of the highest figures for developed countries.

Consumer and health groups including 'Which?' and the British Heart Foundation welcomed the scheme, believing that more food companies will reduce the amount of sugar, salt and fat in popular products.

At the moment, just over 60% of foods will be covered by the new system. The system is voluntary. Not everyone has joined. Many major food and drink companies (Coca-Cola, United Biscuits, Kellogg's, Unilever, and Cadburys) prefer the pan European Guideline Daily Amount (GDA) labelling. The GDA system, they say, gives consumers the information they need to make informed choices about the food they eat.

Many farmers see the traffic-light labelling as simplistic. For example, giving a 'red light' on cheese means that they are seen in the same category as junk food, even though it contains a number of nutrients.

The new system is welcomed by many as clear and helpful, and criticised by others. Whether it will help in making a healthier nation, only time will tell.

To discuss with your students:

What kind of food-labelling system is used in your country?

Do you read the labels when you buy food?

Would a system like the only proposed have any impact on your choice of food products?

Do food-labelling systems help consumers make healthier choices?

Websites to explore:

<http://www.channel4.com/news/food-labelling-traffic-light-anna-soubry>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Traffic_light_rating_system