

Executive Summary

How front of pack (FOP) labels are understood and used by shoppers; Key messages from the research

This summary is aimed at the non-technical reader; more detailed summaries are provided at the beginning of each chapter.

This is the most comprehensive and robust evaluation of FOP nutrition signpost labelling published to date. It provides information on how FOP labels are used by shoppers in a retail environment; the extent to which they are accurately interpreted and the impact of the co-existence of the current range of FOP labels on comprehension.

Overall aim

This aim of this research was to establish which FOP labelling scheme(s), or which combination of elements of schemes, best facilitate the accurate interpretation of key nutritional information by consumers such that they are enabled to make informed choices about the foods they purchase.

The research addressed three key questions:

1. How well do individual signpost schemes (or elements of the schemes) enable consumers to correctly interpret levels of key nutrients?
2. How do consumers use FOP labels in real life contexts in the retail environment and at home?
3. How does the coexistence of a range of FOP label formats affect accurate interpretation of FOP labels?

Comprehension of FOP labels

- **Levels of comprehension of different FOP labels are generally high (ranging from 58% to 71% when looking at labels on single products¹), but two labels achieved the highest levels of comprehension overall:**
 - **One is a label combining text (the words high, medium, low), traffic light colours and % Guideline Daily Amount (GDA) (70%).** This is also one of the top two preferred labels.
 - **The other is a label combining text and traffic light colours (71%).**
 - **Whilst these two labels do not differ in overall level of comprehension, the balance of evidence is that the label**

¹ Combined figures from two separate comprehension tests looking at single products

combining text, traffic light colours and %GDA is the single strongest label overall: It is one of the best liked labels, and it enables shoppers to use information in their preferred format; furthermore the inclusion of %GDA helps shoppers to determine the level of individual nutrients.

- **Some shoppers do use energy (calories) to decide how healthy a product is but the inclusion of energy has no effect on comprehension.**
- **Older adults (over 65), people with lower levels of educational attainment and those from social classes C2, D and E are less likely to be able to accurately interpret FOP labels.** The research also suggests that certain **minority ethnic groups have difficulty interpreting them,** (though because of the sample size, this finding is indicative rather than substantive).
- **Expressed preference alone for particular labels is not a reliable indication of ability to comprehend.** The 'wheel' format of the traffic light label was one of the weakest in performance in the comprehension tests despite being one of the top two preferred labels.

Use of FOP labels

- **Self-reported use of FOP labels is higher than would be concluded from observing what people actually do when they are shopping,** suggesting a degree of 'over claiming'.
- **FOP labels are valued by those shoppers who use them, but they compete with a range of other factors when purchasing decisions are being made.**
- **Other factors influencing purchasing decisions include other information on the product pack,** such as labels indicating the product is part of a 'healthy' range, that it is organic or the look of the product itself. **Shoppers are also influenced by factors such as price; brand loyalty** ('I always buy product x '), and **whether the item is considered to be a 'treat' or a staple.**
- Though some people said FOP labels were hard to see on product packaging (especially when FOP labels used pale colours), **shoppers who notice them make conscious and usually considered decisions** about whether to use FOP labels. Shoppers are most likely to **use them when buying a product for the first time; when comparing between different products; when shopping for children; when they are trying to control intake of certain nutrients** (e.g. fat or salt), usually in relation to a health issue, such as a heart condition, or **when they are trying to lose weight. Though those who have an interest in healthy eating are generally more frequent users of FOP labels, they do not always use them** if they are confident in their knowledge of what is healthy. Conversely, **those who are not interested in healthy eating tend not to use them** and some avoid

them because they perceive FOP labelling as an unwelcome attempt to control their behaviour.

- **FOP labels are more likely to be used in the retail environment than in the home.**

Effects of the coexistence of a range of FOP label formats

- **The coexistence of a range of FOP labels in the market place creates considerable *difficulty in comprehension* for shoppers.** In addition, some shoppers observe that comparing products with different label formats is too difficult, frustrating, annoying or just takes too long.
- **Different use of colour on the different FOP labelling schemes causes confusion for some shoppers in the retail environment.** Some do not realise that the colour (red/green/amber) in the traffic light scheme has meaning. Conversely, some think that the colour used in %GDA schemes has actual meaning. They interpret the cool colours (blue or green) used on monochrome schemes and the nutrient specific %GDA scheme as indicating that the product is healthy (monochrome schemes) or that products are low in nutrients in cool colours (nutrient specific %GDA scheme).

Conclusions

- **The main conclusion from the research is that, although levels of comprehension are generally high for all FOP labels, the coexistence of a range of FOP label formats in the marketplace causes difficulties for shoppers. This suggests that standardising to just one label format would enhance use and comprehension of FOP labels. Overall the balance of evidence from the research shows that the strongest FOP labels are those which combine text (high, medium, low), traffic light colours and %GDA information.**
- **Shoppers who use FOP labels value them, but FOP labels will always compete with other factors when shoppers are making purchasing decisions; these decisions are likely to be perfectly considered and are probably not susceptible to influence. However, there is clear evidence that some groups are less likely than others to use and understand FOP labels and there may be scope for increasing both comprehension and use (for certain purchasing decisions), among at least some of these groups.**
- **The generally high levels of comprehension, even among those who do not currently use FOP labels, provides a good starting point from which to address barriers to FOP label use.**