

Topic Area: Wellness and Public Health

Abstract Title

Examining the impact of numeric versus traffic light calorie labelling at the point-of-purchase on young adults' food and beverage purchases

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Abstract

Introduction: There is substantial interest in calorie labelling in restaurants and fast-food chains, with some jurisdictions mandating *numeric* labelling (e.g., 250 calories per serving). At the same time, Health Canada is considering front-of-package labels with potential implementation of *interpretive* symbols, such as traffic light labelling (TLL), for packaged foods and beverages. Despite high policy interest, there is limited evidence from naturalistic settings on the impact of numeric and interpretive labelling on point-of-purchase food and beverage purchasing decisions.

Objectives: The objective of this study was to examine the impact of numeric versus interpretive calorie labelling on consumer noticing, perceptions and use of labels, and food and beverage purchasing decisions.

Methods: Using a pre-post intervention design, three residence cafeterias at the University of Waterloo were randomized to receive numeric, TLL (i.e., red, amber, or green symbol, also indicating the number of calories), or no calorie labelling for 2 weeks. Exit surveys were conducted with cafeteria patrons prior to (n=949) and following (n=1110) implementation of labels.

Results: Following implementation, approximately 40% of participants exposed to the numeric labelling condition reported noticing any nutrition information, compared with 55% of those exposed to TLL. In the TLL condition, 58% reported they had observed symbols and 48% recalled numbers. Further, 62% and 49% of respondents who noticed TLL and numeric labels, respectively, reported they used the labels to inform their purchasing decisions.

Conclusions: Preliminary findings suggest that noticing and use was higher for TLL versus numeric labels, though even in the TLL condition, numeric information appeared salient. Further analyses will examine purchasing patterns prior to and following implementation of labels compared to the control condition.

Significance to the Field of Dietetics: This study will inform jurisdictions considering nutrition labelling on menus and arm dietitians in positioning such interventions within a broader strategy for supporting healthy and sustainable eating.

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