



ACDPA response to the FRSC food labelling policy guideline

2 February 2020

The Australian Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance (ACDPA) is an alliance of Cancer Council Australia; Diabetes Australia; National Heart Foundation of Australia; Kidney Health Australia; and Stroke Foundation. Members work together to collectively advocate for prevention, integrated risk assessment and effective management of chronic disease risk.

1. What are your overall comments on the Policy Guideline?

Unhealthy diet is a shared risk factor and leading cause of chronic disease burden. Guidelines to improve food labelling, including through regulation, are an avenue to improve the availability and accessibility of information for consumers on the healthiness of products. Food labelling should be evidence-based and informed by consumer testing.

2. How would this Policy Guideline impact you/your organisation?

ACDPA advocates for improvements to food labelling to enable informed choices by consumers and ultimately reduce the impact of unhealthy diets on overweight/obesity and the development of chronic disease. Our member organisations represent people affected by disease, and we highlight that consumers are the end-users who receive benefits from improved food labelling. Consumer testing should inform proposed changes to food and beverage labels.

3. Are there any potential unintended consequences associated with this Policy Guideline?

The proposal to restrict labelling changes that prioritise a single nutrient provides a potential risk. Some specific nutrients are associated with health risks, e.g. salt and hypertension; sugar and overweight/obesity, therefore it is appropriate to single out certain risk nutrients in foods due to their health impacts.

Other potential unintended consequences include preferencing packaged foods over unpackaged, fresh foods such as fruit and vegetables. Fresh unpackaged foods that align with the Dietary Guidelines should be promoted to consumers, to complement food labelling and support healthy dietary patterns.

4. What are your comments on the 'Aim'?

"It is recognised that food labels provide information about a specific foods and nutrients while Dietary Guidelines provide whole-of-diet recommendations about food groups and dietary patterns²."

We are concerned that the 'whole-of-diet' wording is inconsistent with the wording used in the Dietary Guidelines, which focuses on 'dietary patterns.' We also note that the Dietary Guidelines **do** in fact provide information about specific foods (see below image) and that it would be more helpful to identify food labelling as complementing the Dietary Guidelines.

ACDPA recommends that the aim be updated to focus on food labelling supporting overall dietary patterns in line with the Dietary Guidelines to enable consumers to identify healthy and unhealthy foods, compare products and choose healthier options.

Most Australians need to eat less:

- ▶ Meat pies, sausage rolls and fried hot chips
- ▶ Potato crisps, savoury snacks, biscuits and crackers
- ▶ Processed meats like salami, bacon and sausages
- ▶ Cakes, muffins, sweet biscuits and muesli bars
- ▶ Confectionary (lollies) and chocolate
- ▶ Ice-cream and desserts
- ▶ Cream and butter
- ▶ Jam and honey
- ▶ Soft drinks, cordial, energy drinks and sports drinks
- ▶ Wine, beer and spirits



Reference – page 8:

https://eatforhealth.govcms.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/The%20Guidelines/n55a_australian_dietary_guidelines_summary_131014_1.pdf

5. What are your comments on the 'Policy Principles'?

Principle 1 - "Food labels, on the physical product³, should include information to provide consumers the opportunity to identify foods that contribute to healthy dietary patterns aligned with the recommendations of the Dietary Guidelines"

A major purpose of food labelling is to help consumers identify **unhealthy** foods and seek alternatives. Unhealthy foods (or discretionary foods) make up around one-third of daily energy intake. Food labelling is a crucial source of information to help people identify and understand which foods are unhealthy, and to compare foods to find healthier options. This Policy Principle should be updated to include

We support the wording 'on the physical product.' Consumers should not be required to seek health information from a separate source, which would act as a deterrent and additional step. However, we note the additional opportunities to provide food labelling information for unpackaged healthy foods via shelf tags or displays in stores, which has been evaluated to improve consumption of healthier products.

Reference: <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/media-and-resources/2017-vichealth-highlights-healthy-eating>

Principle 2 - "Information that provides consumers the opportunity to identify foods that contribute to healthy dietary patterns aligned with the recommendations of the Dietary Guidelines sits at the mandatory end of the 'dominant intervention mode' within the preventive health section of the Food Labelling Hierarchy⁴ (see Appendix), unless there is an effective co-regulatory measure to achieve the aim and policy principles in this document."

We also suggest including 'unhealthy foods' in the second Policy Principle. We support food labelling sitting at the mandatory end of the Food Labelling Hierarchy to achieve its desired long-term impacts on health. For example, the Health Star Rating system is currently underperforming due to the voluntary nature of the system and uptake of only around 30% of eligible products, which hampers consumers' ability to meaningfully use the information and compare products.

We recommend removing the statement "unless there is an effective co-regulatory measure to achieve the aim and policy principles in this document."

We do not support this exception. Co-designed voluntary measures are often co-designed by the food industry and are inherently inconsistent with the aim of the guideline. First, there can be a commercial conflict of interest in the design of these measures and second, they are inconsistently applied to products on a voluntary basis which limits consumer interpretation and comparison of products – undermining the intent of food labelling to provide health information.

Principle 3 – “Food labels should provide information about a foods’ energy (kilojoule) content to support consumers to monitor energy intakes and assist with achieving and maintaining a healthy body weight.”

We recommend that this principle be incorporated into Principle 4, rather than a standalone principle.

Principle 4 - “Information about nutrients identified in the recommendations in Dietary Guidelines should be presented on food labels:

- *in a manner which is easily understood by consumers,*
- *on a consistent basis to support consumers to compare food products, and monitor consumption, within and across categories”*

We strongly support that information about nutrients should be presented in a manner easily and quickly understood by consumers, hence the benefits in an interpretive system like the Health Star Rating system. We also support consistency on labels (e.g. through information provided per 100mL or 100g to enable comparison). Previous food labelling systems such as the Dietary Intake Guide and energy icon have hampered product comparisons due to inconsistent serving/portion size information.

However, this subpoint may have unintended consequences as there may be circumstances where it is appropriate to display information in a different way for certain categories of foods or nutrients to better assist consumer interpretation.

- *“in a manner such that information about one nutrient should not be emphasised above others, except in food categories where predominantly energy or a single nutrient is present”*

This subpoint should be removed.

We are concerned that this may have unintended consequences regarding how risk nutrients are flagged on labels. Certain nutrients are risk factors for health, including salt and its effects on hypertension and vascular disease, and sugar and its effects on dental decay and unhealthy weight gain. The average consumption of both these risk nutrients exceeds recommendations.

Risk nutrients may be present alone or in combination in certain unhealthy foods, and it is appropriate to flag certain nutrients to improve food labelling and provide information about unhealthy foods, to enable healthier choices and reduce disease risk.

- *“in a manner which does not promote foods, food groups or dietary patterns that are not aligned with recommendations in the Dietary Guidelines.”*

ACDPA strongly supports this subpoint, noting that food labels are often used by the food industry to promote foods inconsistent with the Dietary Guidelines, including the use of food labels to promote unhealthy foods to children and their parents.

We recommend that it be elevated to become a standalone policy principle and should apply to all food labelling, not just nutrients, i.e. *“Information should not be presented on food labels in a manner ...”*

6. What are your comments on the 'Scope'?

No response

7. What are your comments on the 'Definitions'?

We support the inclusion of alcoholic beverages in the definition of food and note the current progression of kJ labelling on alcohol to provide consistent information to support consumer decision making.

8. What are your comments on the 'Context'?

Dietary Guidelines

We note that the Dietary Guidelines also provide information to limit unhealthy foods and specific nutrients that can increase risk of certain chronic diseases. We support greater promotion of the Australian Dietary Guidelines and education to assist consumers to make healthy choices, to complement information on food labels and to promote unpackaged fresh foods.

Food labels

We support the recognition of reformulation as an effective measure to reduce risk nutrients in foods and improve dietary intake at the population level. Consistent food labelling, including through mandating the Health Star Rating system, would provide the impetus for food manufacturers to improve the healthiness of products to achieve higher ratings.

9. What are your comments on the 'Reviews and Updates'?

No response

10. What are your comments on the overall structure and format of the Policy Guideline?

No response

11. Do you have any other general comments on the Policy Guideline?

Conflict of interest should be recognised in this policy guideline. The food industry has a clear commercial conflict of interest and should not be involved in policy decisions on food labelling and health. Food labelling should be led by government and the food industry involvement should be limited to the implementation stage.

Overall, we support guidelines to improve food labelling and highlight the overarching purpose to provide consumers with information to enable healthier choices and improve dietary patterns. We support active consumer engagement on proposed labelling changes to ensure clear, consistent and easily comprehensible information on food labels.