Claiming Health: Front-of-Package Labelling of Children’s Food

The Prevention Institute examined whether the front-of-package labels on grocery store products marketed to children did promote foods that were healthful. After reviewing fifty-eight children’s food products containing front-of-package labels, we found that 84% were unhealthy, as they did not meet one or more nutrient criteria.

Accurate, simple, and scientifically valid nutrition and health information on food labels is a critical public health strategy to help improve shoppers’ food choices and dietary quality, and reduce their risk of diet-related diseases.

Recommendations & conclusion

Our study indicates that manufacturer-developed front-of-package labels may do little to aid families in making informed, healthy purchasing decisions.

Numerous health, medical, and consumer organisations in the United States have called for a uniform front-of-package label that helps consumers’ select healthier food and avoid misleading or confusing labelling. Our findings support this call. Several countries have implemented front-of-package labelling systems including Sweden, Canada, and the Netherlands. In the United States, the FDA should develop and require uniform criteria for front-of-package labelling using a nutrient specific system. This approach will level the playing field, allowing consumers to compare products and choose healthier items. Key nutrition information, including calories, saturated fat (and trans-fat), added sugar, and sodium should be listed in easy-to-read type, on the front of packaging. Nutrients associated with health, including vitamins A, C, D, calcium, and fibre should not be included since they have the potential to mislead shoppers into believing that foods with a poor overall nutritional profile are healthful. The development of such federal criteria will help support informed, healthier choices without undermining consumption of health-promoting whole and minimally processed foods, such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grains.