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CONSUMER OPINIONS OF "HIGH IN" FRONT OF PACK LABELLING STRATEGIES
- Summary -

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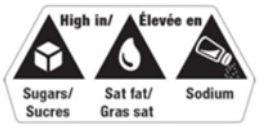
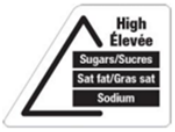
SUMMARY

Health Canada is proposing to improve food labelling with front of package (FOP) information on sodium, sugars and saturated fat in packaged foods. This is part of Health Canada's Healthy Eating Strategy which aims to make healthier food choices easier for Canadians. This consumer opinion research is one component informing the development of a FOP labelling approach that would flag all foods that are "High In" sodium, sugars, and/or saturated fat. Consumer research was conducted in December 2016 to explore consumer access, understanding, appraisal and use of four FOP "High In" labelling approaches on foods with greater than 15% of the daily value of sodium, sugars, and/or saturated fat.

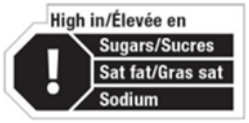


Picture

Octagon



Triangle



Exclamation

Fourteen in-person focus groups (8-9 persons per group) were conducted between December 6 and December 15, 2016 in six cities across Canada. The target groups consisted of English and French-speaking adults with marginal health literacy (six focus groups) and adequate health literacy (six focus groups), and youth 14-17 years of age (two focus groups). Health literacy was assessed using the Canadian version of the Newest Vital Sign© Pfizer tool (used with permission). Participants completed three tasks: (1) a simulated grocery shopping task, (2) a food package labelling task, and (3) a utility ranking task. In the grocery shopping task, participants were asked to select healthier food products among mock products that varied in terms of presence versus absence of a "High In" FOP labelling approach (varied design and placement) for the nutrients (sodium, sugars, and/or saturated fat) they were high in. The food product labelling task probed participants' preferred FOP labelling approach, size, and placement on the FOP so it is "quickly and easily noticed and understood". In the final task, participants subjectively ranked their perceptions of the four FOP "High In" labelling approaches based on how quick and easy they were to notice and understand.

Simulated Grocery Shopping Task

Close to half of the participants noticed the "High In" FOP labels on at least one of the FOP labelled mock products; however, manipulation of the contrast and positioning of "High In" FOP labels on different food packages could have limited consumer awareness and attention to them. Note that prior to the shopping activity, particpants were told the research was funded by Health Canada. This also may have made some participants more likely to bypass the front of the package and go straight to the Health Canada information on the label, compared to what they would normally do in the grocery store, where shoppers typically look at the fronts of packages. Overall, most participants selected products with FOP labels for the fewest "High In" nutrients, but a few participants mentioned they used the presence of a "High In" symbol to make their healthier choices. Some participants questioned the credibility and source of the "High In" FOP labels given that most nutrition information on the front of the package is believed to be

put there at the discretion of manufacturers to promote and market their products, which led to some uncertainty about the real meaning and value of the "High In" symbols. For some, this was a motivation to seek out further information and to check the Nutrition Facts table (NFt) to quantitatively define "High In", while for some others it led to them to disregard the "high in" symbol and evaluate the healthiness of the product on other criteria. For some participants the "High In" FOP label was perceived as credible and was taken at face value as sufficient grounds for rejecting a product as a less healthy choice.

Food Package Labelling Task

The *Exclamation* symbol was a preferred choice of many participants in the food product labelling task because its design was attention-getting. However, some participants felt that the use of text in a list reduced their interest and inclination to take the time to read the text. Participants who preferred the *Picture* symbol felt that it conveyed a "softer" cautionary message as compared to the stronger message of the *Exclamation* symbol, and that it could be useful for those who cannot or will not take the time to read the words. However, other participants had difficulty interpreting the nutrients represented by the pictures, particularly for sugar and saturated fat. Fewer participants showed preference for the *Octagon* symbol, stating that the meaning of the arrow within the octagon was not clear. The *Triangle* design was not well received as participants felt that it did not convey the intended 'High in" meaning. Participants preferring either *Picture* or *Octagon* felt that the separate symbols for each nutrient made it easy to quickly identify the different "High In" nutrients as opposed to reading the list of text in the integrated approaches. They also noted that the increasing amount of FOP space taken up with each additional "High In" nutrient makes it more salient to them. Nonetheless, some found this to be somewhat "overpowering" when all three nutrients were flagged. Those preferring *Exclamatio*n tended to choose the larger size of the symbol to improve its visibility on the FOP. While most participants preferred to place their chosen "High In" FOP label in a consistent position on the FOP across products, there was no group consensus for a preferred absolute location.

Utility Ranking Task

Participants with adequate health literacy were about equally split between preferring *Picture* versus *Exclamation*, and tended to have positive attitudes towards both. Participants with marginal health literacy were somewhat more likely to prefer *Picture* compared to *Exclamation*, but still usually had a positive attitude towards *Exclamation*. Youth preferred *Exclamation* compared to the other three approaches. The octagon with the upward arrow was mistaken by some participants as being a positive message about the product nutrients. The *Triangle* approach was perceived by many participants to be part of the manufacturer's marketing of the product and less likely to be perceived as conveying a sense of warning or caution.

CONCLUSIONS

All tested symbols were useful to various degrees for a wide range of consumers of varying health literacy levels. Both the *Picture* and *Exclamation* "High In" FOP symbols appeared to be quickly and easily noticed and understood. Adult participants tended to prefer *Picture* and *Exclamation*. Among participants with adequate health literacy, *Picture* and *Exclamation* were equally likely to be preferred. Participants with

marginal health literacy were somewhat more likely to prefer *Picture* compared to *Exclamation*, but still usually had a positive attitude towards *Exclamation*. Youth preferred *Exclamation* compared to the other three approaches. This research helped identify key design components that limited their access, understanding, appraisal and use by consumers of varying health literacy levels. Participants suggested that a FOP labelling concept should be complemented by consumer information and education so they know how to look for this when shopping.

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

This qualitative research is designed to reveal a rich range of opinions and interpretations rather than to measure what percentage of the target population holds a given opinion. The results must not be used to estimate the numeric proportion or number of individuals in the population who hold a particular opinion because they are not statistically projectable. The findings should be interpreted as directional only in nature.

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