



## POSITION STATEMENT

# Helping Canadians Make Healthy Food Choices

## Towards Front-of-Package Nutrition Labelling

### What needs to be done?

Heart & Stroke recommends the federal government move forward quickly to finalize front-of-package (FOP) nutrition labelling regulations in Canada Gazette, Part II! These regulations should be mandatory for prepackaged foods that exceed the specified thresholds for sodium, sugar and saturated fat. The “high in” FOP nutrition label symbol should be easy to understand and determined according to consumer research and other research undertaken by Health Canada or independent academic experts.

### Why do we need to do this?

Canada’s Food Guide recommends Canadians limit highly processed foods and drinks as they are not part of a healthy eating pattern. Consuming highly processed foods on a regular basis is harmful to health and puts people in Canada at higher risk for obesity, diabetes, elevated blood lipids, and high blood pressure, all of which are risk factors for heart disease and stroke.<sup>2-4</sup> The cost of chronic diseases (cardiovascular disease, malignant neoplasms, diabetes mellitus, nutritional deficiency and musculoskeletal disease) impacted by diet and other modifiable risk factors in Canada is \$26 billion annually.<sup>5</sup> In Canada, diet-related factors are now a leading risk for death, with almost 36,000 deaths attributed to unhealthy diets in 2019 alone.<sup>6</sup>

Ultra-processed foods account for almost half of the daily calories consumed by Canadians over age two.<sup>7</sup> Children (9 – 13 years) get 57% of their calories from ultra-processed foods, the most of any age group.<sup>7</sup> Ready-to-consume (processed or ultra-processed) food products together made up 29% of total household calories availability in 1938 and 62% in 2001.<sup>8</sup> This is a doubling over 63 years, meaning that Canadian households are increasingly relying on these foods as a large part of their diets.<sup>8</sup> These foods are high in sugar, sodium, and saturated fats and are generally low in protein, fibre, vitamins, and minerals.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, a 10% increase in the consumption of ultra-processed food is associated with a 14% higher risk of all-cause mortality.<sup>9</sup>

The Nutrition Facts Table (NFT) is a credible source of nutrition information on food products. However the information is often difficult to understand and use for shoppers who are trying to make informed choices in a limited time.<sup>10,11</sup> Mandatory FOP labelling in conjunction with the NFT, can help people in



Canada -including newcomers and immigrants- quickly spot foods high in sugar, sodium and/or saturated fat and help them make healthier food choices in the grocery store.<sup>12-15</sup> FOP labelling will also encourage the food industry to reformulate products by reducing the amount of sugar, sodium, and/or saturated fat in prepackaged foods.<sup>16</sup> The proposed Health Canada FOP “high in” labelling with alert symbols provide better guidance than the NFT and can be easily understood by all consumers including those with lower education and health literacy levels, or for those who do speak English as a secondary language.<sup>13,15,17-19</sup>

## Why now?

In 2016, Chile became the first country to require “high in” symbols for pre-packaged food products that exceeded specified limits for salt, sugars and saturated fats.<sup>20</sup> An evaluation six months following the implementation of FOP labelling and other advertising measures found a 14% decrease in sugary cereal purchasing.<sup>21</sup> Eighteen months after implementation, the purchase of drinks high in sugar declined by 25%.<sup>21</sup> When surveyed, 37% of Chileans agreed that FOP labelling led them to make changes in food choices.<sup>20</sup> In a separate scientific review (meta-analysis) of several peer reviewed studies, consumers who were exposed to “high in” FOP labelling reduced the amount of sugar, salt, and saturated fat they purchased compared to consumers who were not exposed to FOP labelling.<sup>22</sup>

There are over 158 unique FOP nutrition labelling systems in Canada, all of which are voluntary, and most of which are industry-driven initiatives used to promote and market ultra-processed foods.<sup>23</sup> Many food industry groups are actively lobbying against the proposed FOP labelling regulations.<sup>24</sup> Some FOP labelling regimes have inconsistent messaging on nutrition content, which can mislead consumers into thinking products are healthier than they are.<sup>25</sup> For example, traffic light style labelling which utilizes red, yellow and green to depict the levels of salt, sugar and saturated fat in foods, can incorrectly portray foods with one or more green symbols as healthy (e.g., sugary drinks with no salt or saturated fat content). Moreover, the failure of the food industry to broadly adopt voluntary FOP labelling highlights the need for mandatory labelling so that public health objectives can be achieved– i.e. supporting all people in Canada, including newcomers, immigrants, and those with lower education or health literacy levels, to make healthier food choices.<sup>26</sup>

The Government of Canada has committed to completing Canada’s Healthy Eating Strategy, which includes “high in” FOP nutrition labelling. The draft regulations were introduced in Canada Gazette Part I in February 2018. It is now time to get these regulations across the finish line.

## References

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