

# The pros and cons of food labelling for healthy choices

Front-of-pack labelling of unhealthy sugary drinks a good move; can extend to other foods

**Eric Finkelstein**

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As part of the national war on diabetes, four measures to reduce Singaporeans' sugar intake from pre-packaged sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) have been considered by the Ministry of Health, together with the Health Promotion Board (HPB).

These are: advertising regulations, mandatory front-of-pack labels, excise duty on such drinks and a nationwide ban on higher-sugar SSBs.

For now, the Singapore Government has decided to introduce two of the four measures: advertising restrictions for the least healthy SSBs and additional front-of-pack nutrition labels. However, they have left the door open for additional measures.

My sense is that, though a reasonable policy, the advertising ban is likely to have a very small effect on SSB intake.

This is because it is extremely difficult to police the many sources of content that may include SSB promotion, particularly when done subtly through social media influencers, rather than overtly through advertisements.

There is even debate as to whether these bans, even when broadly applied, reduce overall consumption or just affect the distribution of market share among existing competitors.

On the other hand, front-of-pack labelling has the potential to reduce caloric intake, but the devil is in the

detail. In fact, even an "effective" label that encourages people to consume more or less of a labelled product may not achieve the intended goal of reducing calories.

Years ago, Dr Li Xiuping, from the National University of Singapore Business School, and I conducted a study on the effect of Singapore's Healthier Choice Symbol (HCS). This is a symbol for food products which meet the HPB's nutritional criteria.

We showed around 50 students two pictures of foods and asked them which they would choose if they could eat just one.

One picture showed a slice of cake and the other a bowl of fruit. Around 30 per cent chose the cake and 70 per cent chose the fruit.

We then asked the same question to another 50 students; only this time, we put the HCS logo in front of the cake, indicating that it was a "healthier" choice.

With the HCS logo, the proportion of students choosing the cake increased from 30 per cent to 50 per cent. In this example, net calories for these students increased as a result of the logo, since the cake has more calories than the bowl of fruit.

You might wonder why we would put the HCS logo on a slice of cake, which is clearly not a "healthy" product. But that is what HPB does.

In fact, the chosen cake did receive the logo, not because it is healthy, but because it is healthier than other cakes. HPB labels products as healthier, not healthy, by comparing them with others in the same food category – that is, by comparing with other cakes.

There is logic to this approach. The idea is that consumers are more likely to switch from a less healthy cake to a more healthy cake, rather than from a less healthy cake to a bowl of fruit.

However, there are several reasons why a new approach is necessary, even if the HCS logo

increases the consumption of labelled products.

The first is illustrated by the example of the cake and the bowl of fruit. As the HCS logo offers a signal that labelled products are "healthier", it is possible that people overconsume these products as a result of the logo. It is even possible that consumers will engage in offsetting behaviours – that is, they will purchase more non-labelled products as a result of buying more "healthy" products.

One restaurant study found that consumers who were induced to purchase healthier entrees also tended to purchase less healthy drinks and desserts – and, as a result, net calories actually increased.

There is another reason why HCS logos are not appropriate for addressing the war on diabetes.

You may not have noticed, but several years ago, the HCS logo was expanded to provide additional nutritional information. While HCS cut-offs are the same for these categories, manufacturers can choose which taglines to use on their products.

However, only a handful of these, including "no sugar added", "sugar free" and "lower in sugar", directly relate to the war on diabetes.

If consumers positively respond to all details on HCS logos, their net caloric intake may still be no lower than if they had ignored the labels altogether. This is because some labelled products that consumers may be induced to purchase get the logo because they are lower in one nutritional dimension, even if they are higher in calories.

One popular brand of strawberry milk, for example, bears the HCS logo due to its low saturated fat content. Yet, it has 69kcal per 100ml compared with Pepsi's 42kcal. From the war on diabetes perspective, Pepsi – and perhaps no label at all – would be a better choice.

This suggests that even if

consumers considered these labels and engaged in no offsetting behaviour – a big "if" – they may not consume fewer calories.

So, the upshot is that the HCS logo likely "works" to influence food purchasing patterns, but it is not the right approach for addressing rising rates of obesity and diabetes.

The Government has recognised the shortcomings of the HCS and proposed a new label. It will be colour-coded with a summary grade based on nutritional quality – for which sugar will be a main determinant – and be mandatory for the least healthy products.

This sounds a lot like France's Nutri-Score, but where SSBs with a D or E grade are required to post the label.

Essentially, it operates as a warning label against these least healthy products. For healthier SSBs, posting the score will be optional, but many suppliers will presumably choose to do so, given that it identifies them as healthier alternatives, much like the HCS logo does. Presumably, the A-grade beverages will be limited to zero-calorie drinks.

By focusing primarily on sugar,

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the new label will tie more closely to obesity and diabetes than the current HCS logo.

Moreover, by mandating that the least healthy products post the score, this approach provides a clear indicator for products to avoid.

Focusing on the worst offending beverages also reduces the likelihood of inducing potentially offsetting behaviour that comes with a positive label. It also provides a clear signal to manufacturers of what is required to get a better rating.

If demand for the worst offending labelled beverages decreases enough, then manufacturers will be induced to reformulate to get a better rating and increase profits.

In summary, the proposed changes are promising. However, they may not go far enough.

Based on the National Nutrition Survey last year, Singaporeans are consuming more calories and sugar from both foods and beverages, and many of the foods that are high in sugar are also of very low nutritional value.

The Government should consider extending the new labelling approach to these foods as well. As pre-packaged foods represented a shrinking portion of total caloric intake, it should also consider, at some point, extending the labelling approach to restaurants and other outlets where high-calorie foods and beverages are purchased.

HPB should also consider reviewing the HCS logo – at least for SSBs – as posting two labels will likely confuse consumers.

Lastly, the Government should conduct a careful evaluation of the new approach to see if it truly reduces caloric intake.

If it does, great. If not, then the Government should expand the labels to cover more foods or beverages, and/or apply a modest tax to the labelled products and slowly increase the tax until it has the desired effect of reducing caloric intake from the targeted products.

Only then will we begin to turn the tide in the war on diabetes and stem the steady rise in rates of obesity.

[stopinion@sph.com.sg](mailto:stopinion@sph.com.sg)

• Eric Finkelstein is professor of global health and the Health Services and Systems Research Programme at Duke-NUS Medical School, Singapore.