

# Food labelling should illuminate – not ruin our appetite!



Moyra Cosgrove



Are you confused about what is in the food that you buy? You are not alone. A debate over labelling of processed foods (designed to inform the consumer) is underway. You will, no doubt, see the TV advertising and notice the new labelling in your supermarket. But the problem is that supermarkets disagree about the way that foods should be labelled and this could potentially cause more confusion!

The Food Standards Agency have researched and introduced a “traffic light system”. This carries red, amber and green coloured labels to identify whether products are high, medium or low in saturated fat, salt or sugar. This has been adopted by Asda, the Co-op, Marks & Spencer, Sainsbury’s and Waitrose.

However, some food manufacturers and supermarkets (e.g. Tesco) have adopted the GDA system – showing “guideline daily amounts” only, giving much more detailed information on the pack. Some see this as an attempt to derail the Food Standards Agency’s traffic light system.

So which system gives the consumer the most reliable information, that is simple to understand and can help the consumer to make an informed healthy choice?

As an independent, fully qualified Nutritionist; I am working on the front line, seeing clients who are looking for ways to improve their long-term health. Many people are confused by the sheer volume of messages regarding food and nutrition that appear in the media on a daily basis. I see people individually, or at group sessions at the Tunbridge Wells Sports and Indoor Tennis Centre. I aim to cut through the mass of information and address the real issues that face ordinary people when making nutritional choices.

Is the chicken madras ready-meal really as big a threat to your health as going a couple of rounds with a heavyweight boxer? Is most of the food we buy in the supermarket really the produce of evil? Unlikely on both counts! Given the statistics on overweight/obesity affecting over half the population, it can still be argued that the unhealthiest food is “second helpings”.

It is right that consumers should be given reliable information on these foods. But it should be remembered that most food is NOT poison, particularly when prepared with love from fresh, local ingredients and shared with friends and family.

I was asked on BBC Breakfast TV recently to give my views on the new labelling. I pointed out that the mainstay of a family’s diet should be fresh foods. However, we all use processed foods to some degree. Therefore, the labelling should provide a quick, simple method of helping the consumer to make an informed, healthy choice. In my view, the traffic light system achieves this. The food industry should by now be adopting a pro-active role in helping to achieve this, for the good of the nation’s health.

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