

The Starlight Research

Professor Cliona Ni Mhurchu, University of Auckland, shared her latest research on nutrition labels at a webinar hosted by Toi Tangata recently. Cliona states 'nutrition labels aren't a silver bullet; however, they are one useful tool in the public health toolbox.'



The health star rating is a voluntary front-of-pack nutrition labelling system that rates food products from ½ to 5 stars based on their nutrient profile or 'healthiness'.

The Starlight research studied the shopping habits of over 1,300 New Zealanders (18% Māori, 6% Pacific) to see if different kinds of labels change the healthiness of foods that shoppers buy. The research showed no significant differences in purchasing behaviour between traffic light labels, health star rating labels and the current back-of-pack nutrition information panels. However, there was a significant preference for traffic light labels and health star rating labels compared with the more complex nutrition information panel.

The Starlight research showed that overall people don't use labels a lot; however, there was a small group (about three in ten shoppers) who read labels more often and the study showed that traffic light labels and health star rating labels led to significantly healthier food purchases by that very motivated group of shoppers.

Do front-of-pack nutrition labels help shoppers to make healthier food choices?

The answer is not noticeably at an overall population level. However front-of-pack nutrition labels do influence the food industry to reformulate products to make them healthier. This has been seen with manufacturers decreasing salt, increasing fibre and reducing total energy contents to enable improved star ratings for certain foods. The health star rating system therefore helps improve the healthiness of the food supply and it won't be long before we see budget brands displaying star ratings with both Foodstuffs and Progressive committing to using this voluntary system on their private label product ranges. Currently about 10% of packaged foods in New Zealand display health star ratings and we should see this number

increase in coming years as new product packaging is phased in. Cliona says 'we need greater uptake of the health star rating system across the whole food supply to improve population diets.' If that doesn't happen within the next few years, then she suggests we need to move from voluntary to mandatory labelling.

What do these findings mean for those working in public health?

Nutrition labels are only one tool in the toolkit and we will gain greater improvements to population diets if we continue to advocate for complementary policy changes like healthy food policies in schools and hospitals, and reducing marketing of unhealthy foods to children. Such policies can build on the health star rating system by promoting foods with more than 3.5 stars.

Cliona acknowledges certain products are controversial as they have a high star rating despite a high sugar content. She encourages all those working in public health to stand up and be heard, provide feedback and have input into the health star rating **system public submission which is now open and closes on 20 July 2017.** 'We should all contribute our views to make the health star rating system more effective in supporting healthy diets.'

Dr Rachael McLean, Senior Lecturer Public Health, Department of Preventive & Social Medicine, University of Otago comments on the Starlight Research.

Testing consumers' purchasing behaviours in response to different nutrition label formats in real world settings is difficult. Ni Mhurchu and colleagues have simulated this in a randomised controlled trial by using a smartphone app to provide participants with access to one of two formats of front of pack label: the traffic light label (widely used on food products in the UK) and the health star rating currently being rolled out in NZ and Australia. The nutrition information panel was used as a control group.

This is an important piece of research, as the health star rating was implemented with little independent research in its support. Although the study found no difference between the three groups with respect to healthfulness of food purchases (according to specified nutrient criteria), frequent users of the app with access to either the traffic light or health star labels did purchase healthier food, and participants found them easy to understand compared to the nutrient information panel.

These results provide support for the implementation of front of pack indicative nutrition labels such as the health star rating and traffic light label systems.

The Health Promotion Agency: What to look for on a food label

This free teaching toolkit contains several re-usable resources providing information on reading New Zealand food labels and includes suggested teaching points and two exemplar labels to help compare similar products.

[Click here to order the free toolkit.](#)