

# Colour code

Just one look at a food label should help you choose a balanced diet, but views differ on what consumers need to see on the front of packs of processed foods. We think it should be red, amber and green

**Y**ou'll probably have seen the recent TV ads, with traffic-light (TL) food labelling pitted against guideline daily amount (GDA) labelling that lacks such colours.

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) has spent £2 million promoting traffic-light labels for the front of food packs. These show crucial nutritional information, such as levels of fat and salt, at a glance, and the FSA wants the food industry to adopt them for processed foods.

However, the GDA campaign has spent £4 million promoting its front-of-pack label based on GDAs only. More than 20 food companies, including Tesco, Unilever and Nestlé, have rejected traffic-light colours and are backing the GDA campaign organised by the Food and Drink Federation.

Our research has shown the FSA's TL label works best for consumers, although some companies have progressed part way by using TL colours on GDA labels.

## Benefits of traffic lights

The FSA surveyed 2,676 consumers in 2005. It found that shoppers are more likely to work out the nutritional content of products using the TL system.

Last year Which? surveyed 636 people. Each was questioned about one of four label types (the TL and three GDA variations). While both GDAs and TLs helped people identify healthier products, 97 per cent spotted healthier versions of similar foods using the FSA's TL label compared with 87 per cent using the GDA campaign's favoured label.

And far more people could gauge levels of nutrients in food using the TL label; 50 per cent correctly identified levels of fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt compared

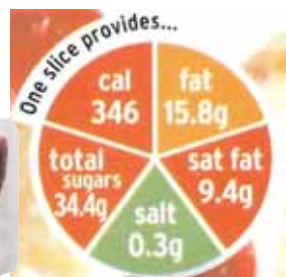
with only 5 per cent using the GDA label. Other organisations, including the British Medical Association, Netmums and the National Heart Forum (NHF) also think GDA labels aren't clear enough to give quick guidance to people when they're out shopping.

The NHF says that a GDA label can mislead, as it gives only rough guides to the total amounts of four nutrients we should eat each day and the guides can look like targets.

As there's no consensus among manufacturers and supermarkets on which labels to use, the FSA has appointed an independent team of experts to review front-of-pack labelling schemes.

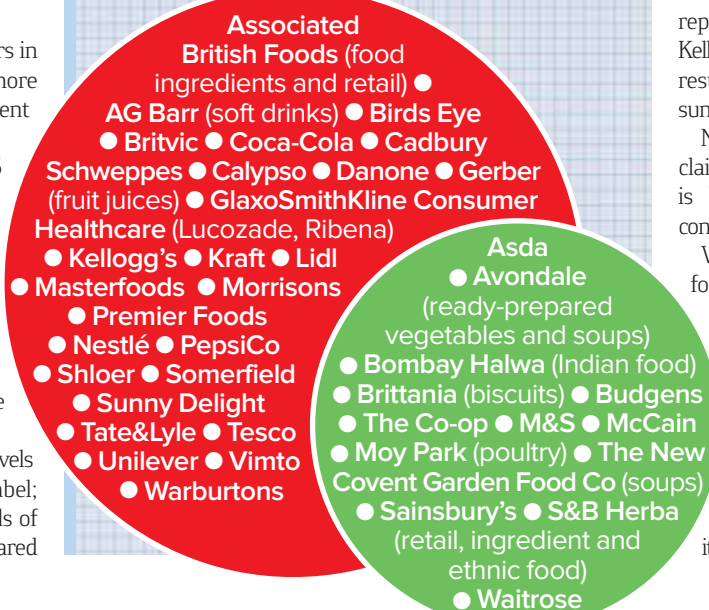


From cheesecake (below) to pasta sauce (above), the wheel of health can help you balance your diet



## WHO SUPPORTS WHICH LABELS?

Our traffic-light colours below can help you shop for a healthier diet. Green (bottom circle) is for companies that have begun to use the traffic-light system, alone or with GDA details. Red (top circle) is for those supporting the GDA label without traffic-light colours



## GDA evidence

One problem is that none of the major companies backing the GDA campaign – Cadbury, Kellogg's, Kraft, Nestlé, Tesco and Unilever – has yet made full details of its research public.

Nor have the companies given full reports to the FSA, despite its requests. Kellogg's and Cadbury told us they've given results, but the FSA is adamant they're summaries only.

Nevertheless, the companies have claimed that support for GDA labelling is based on sound research among consumers and nutritional experts.

We have also asked these companies for research details. GDA campaign Director Jane Holdsworth tells us that research that is not commercially sensitive has been shared and shows that consumers understand GDAs and how to use them.

The campaign has shown us summaries of surveys carried out by Tesco and Kellogg's and of two others, which it says found that consumer awareness of



## SAINSBURY'S TRAFFIC-LIGHT LABELLING IS QUICK FOR A BUSY MUM TO USE

**Julia Collen** 40s, community investment manager

The best thing about the wheel-of-health label, says Julia, is that you can use it quickly. The wheel of health is the traffic-light-style food label used on the front of packs by Sainsbury's.

Julia, who has a five-year-old son, told us the labels work because it's so easy to compare products: 'I have little time to study nutritional information because I often have to shop with Ollie. The colour coding means I can use the labels at a glance.'

## TRAFFIC LIGHTS VERSUS GUIDELINE DAILY AMOUNTS ONLY

### Traffic-light labels

These use red, amber and green to indicate levels of fat, saturated fat, salt and sugar in a product. Labels show whether products have high, medium or low levels of these nutrients in 100g of food.

The levels that dictate each colour are outlined on our food shopping card, the front of which you can see above. The FSA has set different red criteria for foods where portions are more than 100g (see [www.eatwell.org.uk](http://www.eatwell.org.uk)). You can download our card and find other information about our labelling campaign at [www.which.co.uk/foodlabelling](http://www.which.co.uk/foodlabelling).



### GDA labels

The GDA label, developed by the industry body the Institute of Grocery Distribution, is based on the maximum levels of key nutrients we should have in one day.

But without traffic-light colours they

don't indicate whether products have high, medium or low levels, only the amount of each nutrient per portion and its percentage of your GDA.

Also, according to the National Heart Forum, GDA labels can confuse consumers, as there are separate GDA levels for men, women and children in different age groups and adult guidance has been found on products targeted at children.

GDA-type labels is very high and that consumers like them. In addition, we have received a summary of Tesco research into shopping behaviour, which found that GDA labels help people make healthier choices. But none of this consumer research shows that GDA labels perform better or are easier to use than traffic-light labels.

Cadbury tells us it carried out research among groups of consumers which showed that TL labels on confectionery are not useful. But it hasn't given us details.

Only one survey cited by GDA campaigners has found its labelling scheme to be rated more highly than traffic lights – and even this has caused controversy.

It was carried out among nutritionists last year and says those who responded rated the GDA scheme 'more highly...in a series of criteria'. For example, while 60 per cent thought GDAs were useful for finding out about nutritional content of a product, only 25 per cent thought so for TL labels.

Forty five of the 60 members of the group Self-Employed Nutritionists' Support and Enlightenment (Sense) responded to the postal survey, which, Sense says, was impartially drafted and analysed by its own committee.

However, documents obtained by

GDA per pack cooked			% of GDA
MED	FAT	4.2g	6%
LOW	SATURATES	0.7g	4%
LOW	SUGAR	0.5g	1%
LOW	SALT	0.3g	5%



**McCain has added traffic-light colours to the front of its packs of food**

Which? show Sense was paid £9,000 for the survey by a public relations company employed to promote the GDA campaign.

Furthermore, we understand that at least two members of Sense have resigned in protest over the survey.

One of them, Dr Helen Crawley of the Caroline Walker Trust, says: 'For Sense to be involved in providing opinion as a group of nutritionists from the answers to a short and poor-quality research questionnaire, particularly on a topic as complex as food labelling, is inappropriate.'

'Many members have conflicts of interest that might make the findings of this ad-hoc research debatable.'

The Sense committee has refused to comment on the resignations.

### Which? says

Our research of more than 630 people last year found that 73 per cent of them thought different labels on different products were confusing.

We think that widespread use of the best labelling will make shopping easier and hope it will encourage manufacturers to reformulate their products so they become more healthy.

Which? Food Policy Adviser Sue Davies says: 'It is essential we have a consistent, simple labelling scheme for the front of packs, based on what robust research shows is most useful to consumers, and we hope that manufacturers and retailers will commit to this.'