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Opinion

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Many products have warning labels. Why doesn't unhealthy food?

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Consumers will benefit if front-of-package labels are required on all food products in a format that is highly visible and easy to understand, writes the author. (Terry Chea / The Associated Press, 2022)

By [Jim Krieger](#)*Special to The Seattle Times*

You walk down the aisle of the supermarket, hurrying to pick up groceries on the way home from work or with a child in tow. You're faced with shelf after shelf with dozens of items, many claiming to offer good nutrition. You want to choose healthy products low in sugar, salt and saturated fat, but don't have time to pick up each package to find the nutrition facts tucked away on the side or back. Now imagine a simple, easy-to-read label on the front of each package with that information. It's a lot easier to make a healthy choice!

A front-of-package label may be coming soon. The Food and Drug Administration recently sent the White House a proposed rule that would require food and beverage companies to put nutrition information on the front of the package.

Consumers will benefit if the labels are required on all products in a format that is highly visible and easy to understand. These labels should point out foods high in sugar, salt or saturated fat.

| | Per serving | % Daily Value |
|----------------------|-------------|---------------|
| Saturated Fat | 25% | High |
| Sodium | 25% | High |
| Added Sugars | 15% | Med |

FDA.gov

1 of 2 | This is a proposed front-of-package label that features bright colors to alert shoppers to the unhealthy ingredients in a product. Research shows bright colors and simple information get the message across more effectively. (Courtesy of FDA)

Research shows that easily seen and simply worded labels with eye-catching text such as “high in sugar” and [colorful graphics](#) like a bright-yellow exclamation point icon are the most [effective](#). They are preferred by consumers, lead them to make healthier choices and work better than other label designs, including the confusing numeric ones [favored by industry](#). This easily understood label format works equally well for all consumers, regardless of [education](#), preferred language or literacy level.

Labels should also address the use of non-sugar sweeteners. Growing evidence shows they are associated with weight gain, type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular [disease](#). Health effects on children are largely unknown. However, “high in sugar” labels may lead food manufacturers to reduce sugar content and add non-sugar alternatives to maintain product sweetness instead. This occurred after [Chile](#) implemented its labeling law. Mexico, Colombia and Argentina require a label advising consumers to avoid serving products with non-sugar sweeteners to children. The U.S. should do the same.

The food industry will do its best to water down the label regulations. It wants to continue to market and sell its unhealthy products and is concerned that effective labels will reduce profits. So it is proposing complicated labels full of hard-to-understand [numbers](#). Industry has used this tactic in countries around the [world](#) to block effective labels.

Do we need front-of-package labels when products already have a Nutrition Facts Panel? We do — the facts panel is much less effective than front-of-package labels. Fewer than [a third of consumers](#) use the facts panel, with the [lowest use](#) among people with limited English proficiency or less education. The panel is hard to understand and is hidden on the side or back of the package.

It's time for the FDA to require labels. The U.S. lags behind other countries. Along with Mexico and Chile, [dozens](#) of others already have adopted easy-to-understand front-of-package labels.

The bottom line is labels work. After Chile implemented front-of-package labels as part of a comprehensive law to prevent further increases in childhood obesity, calories purchased from labeled products [dropped 24%](#). The [National Academy of Medicine](#) recommended labels more than a decade ago. [The World Health Organization](#) endorses them.

What can we do to make sure the final label is the best one for consumers? It's now up to the White House's Office of Management and Budget to release the proposal for public input. Let the [White House](https://www.whitehouse.gov) (whitehouse.gov) know you want the proposal released now. Let the government know you want bold, easily understood, mandatory labels with graphic icons (like an exclamation point) that quickly convey which products are high in unhealthy ingredients. Millions of people in dozens of countries across the world are already benefiting from labels. We deserve nothing less.

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