

Bamboozled by food packaging? Edinburgh Community Food has the answer

☒ Front of Pack Labelling

Feeling bamboozled by food packaging? (You are not alone!)

Sometimes it feels like going to the supermarket and picking out foods is some sort of intellectual obstacle course. You practically need a degree to make sense of all the information around you. We have to check all the prices against weights (sometimes in kilos, sometimes per 100 grams), check for special offers and two-for-ones (are they actually cheaper than the standard product?), worry about different types of ethics (air miles, carbon footprints, free range, organic, sustainable...) and make sense of coloured blobs on packets ('traffic lights') and things called 'GDAs'. Then we have words plastered all over the packets too: 30% lower fat, zero-fat, 'healthy', gluten-free, one of your five-a-day, 'natural', a source of fibre, omega 3, maintains flexible joints... the list goes on and on! And all this is even before we look at the back of packets with all the ingredients and nutritional information! Following a healthy diet is getting harder and harder with just too much information which varies from product to product. Indeed, it seems that different companies wilfully use different designs! Are they just trying to confuse us? Bamboozle us into not noticing what is and isn't good for us?

Healthy foods and ethical foods are big business these days and food manufacturers are not slow in telling you how wonderful their products are. We customers are bombarded with all sorts of different health messages from the TV, newspapers and magazines but food companies seem to be amongst the worst

culprits. A quick glance round your average shelf in your local supermarket will give you a good example of this and I suspect that many of us just switch-off to the whole thing, feeling we can't be bothered trying to suss out what's good and what's not. Remember, their primary aim is not to make you more healthy, but to separate you from your hard-earned cash! Despite the Food Standards Agency (FSA) offering guidelines, marketing terms like 'fresh', 'pure', 'natural' and 'traditional' still have no legal definition but simply serve to manipulate the public. While butter may be labelled 'pure' – perhaps suggesting it is somehow more wholesome than low sat-fat margarine – not many doctors will recommend it for cardio-vascular patients!

✘ Staff at [Edinburgh Community Food](#) (ECF) were recently involved in a UK-wide consultation exercise on what should, and shouldn't, be put on the front of food packaging. Currently, people find pack labelling confusing, misleading, inconsistent and unclear, yet often overly simplistic (for example, based on the traffic lights system, raisins and sweeties both look equal – green for salt and fat, red for sugar). Different companies use different traffic-light logos and other still use the more complex Guideline Daily Amounts (GDAs) system. Some foods give you information for 100 grams while other packets give it per portion. Yet, there is no agreement on what, exactly, a portion or serving is (hint: a single chocolate cookie is NOT a portion for most of us!) or whether it's for a man, woman or child. Further, some of those foods that give you nutrition information for 100 grams hide the total weight for the packet round the back in the small print. It's all very well knowing that your lovely lean beef burgers have such-and-such fat per hundred grams, but what if you eat the whole packet? You need eagle eyes and a calculator to hand. Try telling that to a parent in the shop with screaming kids!

The national government is aware of all this and is now trying

to improve the situation and make labelling clearer, easier to understand and consistent. The government hopes that by improving all this information it will help people to make healthier choices when shopping, and will in turn have a positive impact on the nation's obesity epidemic. In lieu of taking more radical action to address the nation's waistlines (by taxing saturated fat, for example, or forcing all restaurants to show the nutrient content of their dishes), the government is, at least, proposing to legislate on this, front of package labelling. Hopefully before too long we consumers will find it much easier to simply look at food packets, see what they contain at a glance and make informed, healthier choices.

Submitted by [Christopher Mantle](#)