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Use the **academic address** when writing about **salt control**—see the panel on page 4.

## Traffic Light food labels in depth

References on page 4

### FIRST PROBLEM

The diet and lifestyle of an industrial society gives us huge epidemics of heart disease and over 20 other preventable 'diseases of civilisation' [1], which include overweight, obesity, diabetes [2] and a 90% chance of high blood pressure before we die [3].

### THE ANSWER

All these health problems, including essential hypertension (the common form of high blood pressure), are almost completely preventable with a healthy diet and lifestyle—for all who are willing to make a permanent change and do it well [4,5].

Most people would need a radical change. Foods would need to be low in fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt. The UK Food Standards Agency sets these limits for 'LOW':

- FAT—up to 3%.
- SATURATED FAT—up to 1.5%
- SUGAR—up to 5%
- SALT—sodium up to 120 mg/100g

### SECOND PROBLEM

*Nobody follows advice like this—who would remember this list of figures, or check them for every food they buy?*

### THE ANSWER

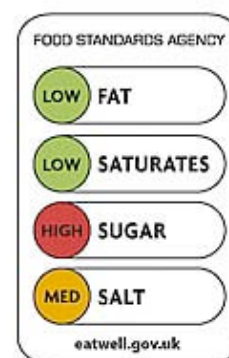
Traffic Light colours (green, amber and red) can say it all on food labels, with no figures to remember or check.

### MOREOVER IT WORKS

This is not just a good idea, it has arrived in the UK and is already working and helping people with their shopping.

Surveys by the Food Standards Agency compared simple and multiple versions of Traffic Light labels with a scheme recommended by the food industry and another based on a healthy eating logo. The preferred schemes were simple and multiple traffic lights (6).

Two UK supermarket chains have already adopted them for their home brands and reported great consumer satisfaction [6].



The multiple traffic light

This label indicates that the food is low in fat and saturated fat, but high in sugar, with a moderate amount of salt. At present this scheme is voluntary in the UK, but almost all the shoppers who see it can tell you what they are buying,

# Dietary Guidelines are now visible

## THE STORY SO FAR

**Invisible guidelines.** The last issue pointed out that the Australian Dietary Guidelines had been advising 'moderation' in fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt for years without any measurable effect. What was wrong?

1. The Guidelines didn't say what 'moderation' was—how much was too much;
2. Nobody had ever seen them.

## Visible guidelines

1. An amber Traffic Light label makes 'moderation' unmistakable;
2. On food labels in every supermarket nobody can fail to see it.

This system could give Australians the benefits of the Heart Foundation's highly successful 'Tick' program and avoid its main practical problems. For example:

- The Heart Foundation can't expect everybody to make a radical change, so the 'Tick' is only a guide to a better diet ('moderation'), not a prescription for an ideal diet. Traffic Lights would show two degrees of approval—an amber light for better foods and a green light for the very best and healthiest foods.
- The Heart Foundation has to charge a fee to cover the administrative and analytical costs of monitoring foods. This means a shopper can't tell if a food without the 'Tick' is not good enough, or whether it is really an excellent product that happens to be made by a company that hasn't subscribed. The Traffic Light labels would be government-controlled and could eventually become mandatory for all of the labelled foods sold in Australia.

## LATEST NEWS

On 21 August the Medical Journal of Australia published an Editorial on *The unstoppable Australian obesity and diabetes juggernaut. What should politicians do?* [2]. The authors proposed six government regulations, including:

- **'traffic light' food labelling . . . on all foods, drinks and meals, wherever sold.**

To see why they want Traffic Lights, check the green and red boundaries of amber for each type of nutrient in the box below. Foods with over 15% fat would have a red light for fat, and 3% or less would get a green light.

Mothers who wanted to control their children's weight could avoid buying any more foods with red lights for fat.

Black, grey and white spots (labelled HIGH, MEDIUM or LOW) might be used for recipe books and menus for restaurants, institutions and meals on wheels.

### Revised green and red boundaries of amber ('MODERATE') by the UK FSA

FAT—green 3%, red 15%

SATURATED FAT—green 1.5%, red 5%

SUGARS—green 5%, red 15%

SALT—green 0.3%, red 1.5%, equivalent to sodium from 118 to 590 mg/100g

(the green boundary rounded to 120 mg/100g uses the Australian—and international—upper boundary for low salt foods).

The UK FSA has updated three red boundaries in this box since the last issue of Salt Skip News. Fat and sugar are stricter but salt is more lenient for the time being. This and its relevance to Australia are discussed on page 4.

# Traffic lights—further debate

## POSSIBLE PROBLEMS

Since the last issue of Salt Skip News there have been two active email debates on the Traffic Light system—by saltmatters (salt skippers) and Nut-Net (mainly dietitians). Some of the issues:

### Colour-blindness

About 0.7% of Australian women and 7% of men are colour-blind (about one million of the 12 million adult population).

Printing the words **HIGH**, **MEDIUM** and **LOW** in addition to using colour should cater for colour-blindness especially if different cross-hatching patterns could further distinguish the colours.

### Foods near the boundaries

When two almost identical foods lie close to a boundary but on opposite sides, a sodium content of 118 and 122 mg/100g would give one a green light and the other an amber light, looking no better than a food with say 450 mg/100g.

This is a problem with all boundaries (including the Heart Foundation criteria for the 'Tick'), but it prompts the makers of foods above a boundary to produce healthier foods, which is highly desirable.

See the surprisingly variable sodium content of Kellogg Just Right (mg/100g):

- 600 Kellogg UK 1997 Just Right
- 450 Kellogg UK 2005 Just Right
- 284 Kellogg Australia 1997 Just Right
- 49 Kellogg Australia 1998 Just Right
- 30 Kellogg Australia 2002 (JRO)\*
- 365 Kellogg Australia 2006 (CBJR)\*\*
- 430 Kellogg Australia 2006 (CBJR)\*\*

\*JRO—Just Right Original (very popular)

\*\*CBJR—2 Crunchy Blends of Just Right

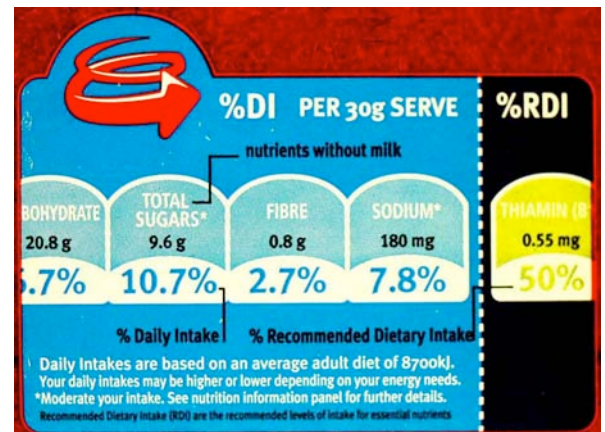
Traffic Light labels might renew Kellogg Australia's interest in controlling salt.

### From the industry's viewpoint

Unfortunately food labels that can alter consumer choice could hardly fail to put the food industry to a great deal of trouble and expense.

Food manufacturers want a different scheme—better from their viewpoint—and an early example is the Kellogg DI (Daily Intake) Counter.

The picture shows DI Counter data for Kellogg Nutrigrain, which is Australia's second best-selling breakfast cereal (after Sanitarium Weet-Bix):



Note that a 30g serve of Nutrigrain gives you 10.7% of your daily **TOTAL SUGARS** and 7.8% of your daily **SODIUM**. An asterisk against sugar and salt tells you to 'moderate your intake'.

Traffic Light labels using the original UK red boundary would give Nutrigrain two red lights—for sugar and salt—because the Nutrition Information Panel for Nutrigrain shows 32% sugar and a sodium content of 600 mg/100g.

Naturally Kellogg prefers a system with no red lights, especially as Weet-Bix would have only one amber light (for salt) and three green ones.

The sugar and salt naturally present in cereals would give them green lights, so Nutrigrain could also have green or amber by just adding less.

Food technology may require these amounts. But Traffic Lights would show consumers what they get if food technology wins, and let them choose health if there is any conflict between health and food technology [2].

# RED BOUNDARY for SALT—some points

## SALT SKIP NEWS

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Page 4 of 4

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Salt Skip News will  
continue to be distributed  
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Monitor (QHA newsletter)

## CEREAL FOODS—our main source of salt

- the natural sodium content of cereals is under 5 mg/100g
- yet salt added to cereal foods is **20% of all the salt we eat**
- our staple food is BREAD—the equivalent of rice in Asia
- and the dietary guidelines prescribe even MORE bread.

## BREAD—A CRUCIAL FOOD FOR SALT CONTROL

- note—0.9% is the strength of normal saline used in hospital drips
- and stronger concentrations make you thirsty
- 1.4% is the salt in standard bread (2% of the flour weight)
- **1.25% was the original UK red boundary** for salt
- some UK bakers have reduced salt, but not yet reached amber
- **1.5% is the new UK red boundary** for salt
- the UK now gives standard bread—at 1.4%—an amber light
- but the boundary is adjustable, like the Heart Foundation 'Tick'

## AUSTRALIAN BREAD

- 1.0% to 1.85% is the range for 22 breads in the Australian food tables (sodium 400–725 mg/100g)
- note that—for decades—Australian bread with 1.0% salt has been competing successfully with breads containing up to 1.85% salt

## Criterion for the Heart Foundation 'Tick' for bread

- 1.1% salt is the present limit for the 'Tick'
- 1.0% will be the limit for the 'Tick' from February 2007

## AUSTRALIAN RED BOUNDARY FOR SALT

- 1.0% is likely to be feasible for a red light earlier in Australia

	<i>salt</i>	<i>sodium</i> mg/100g	
<b>GREEN</b>		under 120	low salt bread
-----	0.3%	120	
<b>AMBER</b>	0.9%	350	reduced salt bread
-----	1.0%	400	<b>marketable</b> bread
<b>RED</b>	1.25%	500	original UK red light
	1.4%	550	<b>average</b> bread
	1.5%	600	present UK red light
	2.5%	1000	<b>seawater</b>

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