

Review Article

The Choices programme: a simple, front-of-pack stamp making healthy choices easy

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Some food products fit better within a healthy diet than others, but how can consumers tell? The Choices programme is a simple and internationally-applicable programme to help consumers make a healthy choice on food and beverages and to stimulate industry towards healthy product innovation in all food groups. The essence of the programme is a front-of-pack stamp on products that pass an evaluation against scientific criteria. To that end generic criteria have been established for levels of saturated fat, trans fat, sugars and sodium, which are based on international dietary guidelines (FAO/WHO). For some food categories there are specific criteria for these nutrients as well as for dietary fibre and calories. In this way the criteria are challenging without being impossible to meet. The programme has been initiated by food industry and is open to all companies in food industry, retail and catering. The approach is also supported by nutritional scientists, governments and NGOs. An independent scientific committee is responsible for designing and periodically reviewing the qualifying criteria. The current qualifying criteria were developed by scientific committees in the Netherlands and Belgium. These criteria will now be reviewed by an International Scientific Committee, consisting of internationally-recognised food and nutrition experts. To accommodate the developments in nutrition science and food technology, this review will take place every two years.

Key Words: nutrient profiling; qualifying criteria, trans fatty acids, saturated fatty acids, sodium, sugars

INTRODUCTION

There is robust evidence that dietary factors are related to the development of chronic diseases such as heart disease, stroke, obesity and diabetes. When consumed in high amounts, trans fat, saturated fat, sodium, sugar, and energy have been convincingly associated with undesirable health effects.¹ The WHO Global Strategy recommends the private sector to limit the levels of these nutrients in existing and innovation products in order to reduce the burden of chronic diseases on society.²

In general, measures of nutritional quality are mainly focused on total diets only.³⁻⁶ Attempts have been made to define the nutrient quality of individual foods^{7,8} and local nutrient profile systems are available to assess the nutritional quality of food products, in various countries.^{9,10} Disadvantage of these methods are that they are limited in global applicability because they are based on local legislation, food intake data and/or dietary recommendations. Legislation is not based on the latest scientific insights on healthy eating and can be very different between countries. Also food intake data differ among countries. Some local nutrient profile systems leave out specific product categories from assessment; the reason given is that these products would by definition not fit in a healthy diet. However, such products can contribute significantly to a lowering of the nutritional quality of the diet when they have a suboptimal composition.

The Choices stamp is applicable to all food and beverages that meet the Choices qualifying criteria based on

international dietary guidelines for saturated fat, trans fat, sodium and sugars. The criteria have been developed and will be periodically reviewed by an independent Scientific Committee made up of leading scientists.

WHAT IS CHOICES?

The Choices programme is a world-wide initiative set up to make the healthy choice the easy choice. It has introduced a simple front-of-pack stamp on food products that have passed an evaluation against a set of qualifying criteria based on international dietary guidelines. Those criteria are periodically reviewed by an independent international scientific committee made up of leading scientists.

The Choices stamp is:

Simple – One stamp for many products and is easily recognisable within a few seconds.

Credible – The qualifying criteria have been developed by independent, leading scientists and the stamp is assigned to a product by an independent certifying agency.

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Open – Any food, retail or catering company can participate.

International – A global initiative, applicable for all food products and beverages.

The Choices programme has two key objectives:

- To help consumers identify quickly healthy food choices at the moment of purchase.
- To encourage food industries to improve the composition of their products, thus increasing the availability of healthier food and beverages.

The Choices stamp is based on research showing that consumers prefer healthy food but find it difficult to make an informed choice. Lacking straightforward and reliable information, many of them are confused about which products really are the healthy choice. A simple communication tool such as the Choices stamp can instantly clear up the confusion.

Importantly, the Choices programme is open to all food manufacturers, retailers and caterers, counteracting the proliferation of health logos and labels that only further confuse consumers.

The Choices programme aims for an active role in tackling the global trend in growing rates of obesity and diet-related diseases, as has been called for by the World Health Organization.¹

CHOICES QUALIFYING CRITERIA

Originally, the qualifying criteria were based on a peer reviewed method – based on a set of 20 international and national dietary guidelines.¹¹ These criteria have recently been reviewed by independent scientific committees in The Netherlands and Belgium and have been translated into the most recent qualifying criteria, as applied in these countries.^{12,13} The current set of qualifying criteria will pass another expert validation by the International Scientific Committee to set the new Choices international qualifying criteria, expected to be available in July 2008.

Principles

The qualifying criteria are used to evaluate food products based on their nutritional composition. The criteria are firmly grounded in four key principles. They are:

- Based on sound scientific evidence.
- Applicable to all food and beverages.
- Practical to implement.
- Globally applicable.

Only few products have been excluded from evaluation: alcoholic beverages, supplements, products for use under medical supervision and foods for children under the age of 1 year.

Selection of nutrients

Qualifying criteria have been set for key nutrients based on international dietary guidelines from the World Health Organization.¹ The aim of these criteria is:

- To limit the intake of saturated fat, trans fat, sodium (salt) and sugars, i.e. nutrients that have been demonstrated to negatively impact human health.
- To ensure the intake of beneficial nutrients, such as dietary fibre.

- To promote an appropriate energy intake.

Dietary intakes of saturated fat, trans fat, sodium (salt) and sugars are usually well above recommendations. In addition, there is convincing evidence that a high intake of dietary fibre is associated with a reduced risk for obesity. Average dietary fibre intakes among adults in Western countries do not meet recommendations for maintenance of health and disease prevention.

Criteria

Generic criteria were established (see below) from which specific criteria were derived for various product groups. The generic criteria are somewhat less stringent than recommendations for total daily intake because diets consist of many food products, not all of which contain saturated fat, trans fat, salt, or added sugar. By consuming products meeting the criteria for the Choices stamp in each product category, consumers end up with substantial healthier diets in the direction of the WHO recommendations.

In principle, generic criteria for saturated fats, trans fats, sodium and sugars are applied to all products. However, for some product categories it is impossible to comply with the generic criteria because of technological and taste reasons, whereas there is still a need for a stimulus for product innovation. Therefore, product groups were identified for which product group specific criteria were defined (e.g. bread, meat). For some product groups additional criteria were set for fibre and calories. This stimulates the food industry to increase the availability of healthy products on the market through product innovations and product optimizations, offering consumers a broader range of healthy products.

In the programme, a distinction between is made between main foods and supplemental foods. Main Foods are the basis of a healthy diet and they substantially contribute to the daily intake of essential or beneficial nutrients. Supplemental Foods generally provide less essential nutrients when compared to the Main Foods. In general the criteria for Supplemental Foods are stricter than for the Main Foods.

The independent International Scientific Committee will evaluate the qualifying criteria every two years taking into account the latest developments in nutritional science and on the market. The committee independently applies the latest scientific research, thereby safeguarding the credibility and reliability of the system. In doing so, it will continue to encourage product innovation and optimisation in the food industry.

CHOICES FRONT-OF-PACK STAMP

A simple front-of-pack labelling format is effective in helping consumers make healthy choices and improve their buying behaviour. Research also suggests that positive labelling leads to consumers replacing less-healthy variants with healthy choices rather than an over consumption of healthy products.^{14,15}

The above findings were taken into account when designing the Choices stamp. It features a simple tick logo. According to the local language, the stamp will carry different names – but all being an expression of a healthy / easy choice such as “Eat Smart”, “Bewusst Wählen”, “Choix et Nutrition”, “Ik Kies Bewust”, “Vim co Jim”.

CHOICES INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

The Choices International Foundation has been established to facilitate global introduction of the Choices stamp across food manufacturers, retailers and food services while maintaining the integrity of the programme. The foundation has been founded by food multinationals: Campina, Friesland Foods and Unilever. At national levels, many more companies are participating.

The Choices International Foundation will provide a framework for quality control and monitoring, being advised by an international scientific committee. The International Scientific Committee is being established and will consist of 12 leading food and nutrition scientists from all over the world, chaired by Professor J. Seidell, professor Nutrition & Health from the Free University in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. National Choices foundations are responsible for arranging stamp clearance and compliance control with an independent body.

The Choices programme has been implemented in 20 countries, including France, the Czech Republic, Poland and the United States. More than 1700 products carry the Choices stamp, and the number is growing rapidly. The stamp uses local languages to send the message of a healthy/easy choice. The programme is being expanded to more countries. In all those countries, national governance structures are seeking the endorsement of local authorities, non-governmental organisations and civic society.

The Choices programme believes that it will be able to contribute significantly to global health because it has:

- One international system with high credibility that is easy to understand.
- One simple and positive stamp, enabling quick consumer decisions.
- No confusion because there is no need for different stamps for different products or producers.
- An incentive for behavioural change by positively changing perception and usage intention of food products.
- A design that complements nutritional labels.

IMPLICATIONS

When compared to global market standards, Choices products are generally lower in saturated fat, trans fat, sodium and sugars than products that do not qualify for the stamp, as they are tested against the criteria for these nutrients. Also in relevant product groups, Choices products are generally higher in fibre and contain appropriate levels of energy. Receiving a tick is a strong incentive for food companies to make their products healthier. Healthy products like fresh fruits and vegetables get a Choices stamp by default.

Many examples are available on how the Choices programme has stimulated product optimisation, such as a fat and sugar reduction in yoghurt (drinks) (Campina, Friesland Foods), an energy reduction in meat products (Enkco Foodgroup), a sodium reduction in bread (Bakels Senior) and an increase in vegetables in meal dishes (Unilever). These were done to qualify for the Choices stamp or to retain the stamp after revisions in qualifying criteria. Additionally, all partners of the Choices International Foundation (Campina, Friesland Foods and Unile-

ver) have fully integrated the Choices criteria in their innovation processes.

Also monitoring the effect of Choices is an essential part of the Choices Programme. Pilot daily diet calculations demonstrate that dietary intakes move towards WHO recommendations when regular products are replaced with Choices compliant products in a typical Dutch daily diet.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

With the Choices Programme, the usage of healthy products at the expense of less healthy variants is being promoted. By choosing healthy options in each product category, consumers end up with substantially healthier diets in accordance with the WHO recommendations, which consequently may have a significant and positive impact on public health.

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Mariska Dötsch-Klerk works at the Unilever Food and Health Research Institute and represents Unilever, one of the participating food companies in the Choices programme. Léon Jansen is secretary of the International Scientific Committee of the Choices International Foundation and works at Schuttelaar & Partners, a consultancy firm that operates as the Foundation's Secretariat.

AUTHOR DISCLOSURES

Mariska Dötsch-Klerk and Léon Jansen, no conflicts of interest, except that this paper is the authored from the Unilever Food and Health Research Institute.

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