
Executive summary

Food companies have various ways of indicating that certain products are good for one's health. Logos for this were introduced in the Netherlands several years ago.



The Choices stamp is an initiative by Unilever, Friesland Foods and Campina. More than one hundred companies now participate in this initiative and many of these companies have products that carry the Choices stamp. The Healthy Choice Clover is an initiative by Albert Heijn. Only the Own-Brand products of this supermarket chain are eligible for the Healthy Choice Clover. Each of these logos is awarded according to their own set of criteria.



Another way of informing people about the nutritional value of food products is by listing the levels of nutrients (nutritional information) on the product packaging. Recently a new format has been introduced to present this information front-of-pack, the so-called GDA system. This system was developed by the European umbrella organisation of the food industry.

The use of logos provides opportunities for improving dietary habits and public health. Whether this will actually occur, depends on three aspects. Are the logos assigned according to sound criteria? Do the consumers use this information correctly when choosing products? Do the logos stimulate manufacturers to improve their range of products? In this advisory report, the two existing Dutch logos will be compared on these points based on the current state of scientific knowledge.

This advisory report also contains an evaluation of the GDA system. This system differs fundamentally from the logos, because nutritional information may be listed on every product and still requires interpretation by the consumers, whilst the logos create the direct message that the product can contribute to a healthy eating pattern, because they are only featured on products that meet the criteria for that logo.

The logo criteria do not sufficiently tie in to the food education

In the Netherlands, the general public education on healthy eating is organised by the Netherlands Nutrition Centre. This is based on the Guidelines for a healthy diet 2006 of the Health Council. The committee is of the opinion that the message communicated by the logos should be consistent with this general food education. Therefore, the committee has compared the criteria for awarding these logos with the evaluation of the health value of food products by the Netherlands Nutrition Centre.

The food education by the Netherlands Nutrition Centre is based on assigning all food products into three categories: 'preferable', 'in moderation' and 'occasionally'; the criteria on which these three categories are based have been described in the Food-Based Dietary Guidelines report. For example, wholemeal bread is put in the category 'preferable', brown bread in the category 'in moderation' and white bread in the category 'occasionally'. As the current logos divide food products into two instead of three categories (products either have the logo or they don't), the committee is of the opinion that the criteria for awarding the logos should be consistent with the 'preferable' category used by the Netherlands Nutrition Centre. Currently, certain 'in moderation' products and even some products that should only be eaten occasionally can be awarded a logo. Based on this starting point, the committee has concluded that the current criteria for awarding the logos must be tightened.

For the Choices stamp, especially the criteria for dietary fibre, the criteria for the saturated fat and added sugar levels of dairy products and the criteria for the calorie content of soups, sauces, snacks and biscuits should be tightened. In the case of the criteria for the Choices stamp, the existing range of products forms

the most important starting point* and not – as for food education – current eating habits in the Netherlands and the desired improvements. This is probably the most important cause of the discrepancies.

In assigning the Healthy Choice Clover, the main problems are the criteria for sodium (table salt), trans fats and ready-to-eat meal products and the lack of criteria for the calorie content of soups and sauces.

The GDA system does not sufficiently tie in to the Dutch Guidelines for a healthy diet 2006

The GDA system provides information about the levels of one or more nutritional factors in a portion of the product. Currently, a manufacturer wishing to display the GDA system on the packaging of a food product has three options: presentation of the calorie content only, presentation of the amount of calories, total fat, saturated fat, total sugar and sodium, or presentation of these five levels plus the fibre content.

The committee is of the opinion that the GDA-system should contain the nutritional factors which, according to the Guidelines for a healthy diet 2006, are of importance for evaluating the health benefits of foods. The total fat content and total sugar content are important for health, because fats and sugars contain calories. However, the GDA system already states the amount of calories in a portion of the food product. People wishing to reduce the number of calories that they consume should, according to the Guidelines for a healthy diet 2006, focus especially on unhealthy fats (saturated and trans fat), added sugar and sugar-rich drinks. The committee recommends for the GDA system to include the following six nutritional factors as a standard: calories, saturated fat, trans fat, free sugars, sodium and fibre. Of these six, dietary fibre is the only one of which consumption should be promoted. The consumption of saturated fat, trans fat, free sugars and sodium should be limited. This also applies to calories for people who are overweight.

The committee endorses the reference values used to calculate the GDA percentages for calories, saturated fat and sodium. The committee urges that the ref-

* The criteria for the Choices stamp are aimed at being attainable for approximately 20 percent of the basic food products and approximately 10 percent of the non-basic food products. The basic food products are vegetables, fruit, bread, potatoes, pasta, rice, legumes, fish, meat (products), poultry, eggs, meat substitutes, dairy, spreadable fats, cooking fats and drinks. They are essential for the provision of nutrients such as vitamins and minerals, this in contrast to non-basic food product groups such as snacks, biscuits, sweets, sauces and soups intended as a starter or snack.

erence value for dietary fibre be increased to the level of the Netherlands fibre guideline and has proposed reference values for free sugars and trans fat.

Little is currently known about how consumers use the logos and the GDA system

The scarce data available indicates that most consumers know that the logos are linked to health in one or another way. A lack of peer-reviewed research makes it impossible to determine whether consumers' eating habits have become healthier as a result of the logos. This requires more research, for example into potential misconceptions.

In the case of nutritional information, it is left to the consumer to determine how healthy or unhealthy a product is. There are indications that fewer than half of consumers, when asked questions about specific values in the GDA system, are able to answer these questions correctly; however, little is known about the comprehensibility of the entire GDA system. Scientific research has shown that consumers are better able to understand nutritional information and find this information more attractive when traffic light colours are used to indicate whether the values are favourable, neutral or unfavourable.

The committee sees a need for further research into the comprehensibility of the logos and the GDA system and the way in which consumers use this information when making product choices.

A favourable effect on product development is plausible for the logos, but not for the GDA system

It is not clear whether the option of placing a logo on food product packaging will stimulate the industry to improve the composition of their products or to develop healthy products, because there has been no scientific research on this subject. Based on information gathered from hearings with manufacturers and organisations involved, the committee does deem this incentive to be plausible for the logos. The hearings provided no consistent indications of an effect for the GDA system on product development.

A sketch of the ideal situation

According to the committee, the ideal situation would be as follows. In the Netherlands, there would be one logo for the promotion of healthy food choices, which would tie in seamlessly with the general public education on healthy eat-

ing. All products that meet the criteria will carry this logo, so that not only the presence, but also the absence of the logo will provide information about the health benefits of the product. In addition, the nutritional information – which allows consumers to evaluate the health benefits of the product – would be listed on the front of the packaging on all products (irrespective of whether it carries a logo).

A plea for one single logo with two different manifestations

According to the committee, consistency between the logos and the general public education on healthy eating is the main priority in creating clarity for the consumers. As long as there is no convincing evidence that consumers are able to handle logos that indicate whether or not the product is relatively healthy within its own product group, the committee is of the opinion that logos should only be awarded to healthy products.

If the current logos are maintained, in which products are divided into two groups (with and without logo), the committee is of the opinion that only products that are preferable according to general public education on healthy eating should be eligible for the logo. This choice most closely matches that of the Dutch Guidelines for a healthy diet 2006. This means that the logo criteria will have to be substantially tightened and the objection is that a large number of products will lose the logo. This may affect consumer confidence in the logos, is bad for the potential effect on product development and is also unfavourable for the consumer, because there will be less choice within the logo range.

Therefore, the committee urges the development of a logo with two manifestations, in which one form is used for food products that should preferably be eaten, according to the food education and the other form for the products in the ‘eat in moderation’ category. A condition for this system would be that research would have to determine whether such a logo with two manifestations would be sufficiently understandable to the consumer. Application of the logo with two manifestations would allow the range of logo products to be maintained, without this affecting the educational message.

The GDA system requires modification

The committee is of the opinion that the GDA system should contain standard information about the amount of calories, saturated and trans fats, free sugars, sodium and dietary fibre. The committee recommends that a colour code indicates whether levels in the product are favourable, neutral or unfavourable levels.

Without such a colour code the GDA system will not be understood properly. The committee recommends to study how such colour code should be used in order to make the GDA-system more comprehensible.

The information about logos and the GDA system to the consumer must be improved

The committee recommends that a new information system will be drawn up for consumers, in which the logos and the GDA system are explained in reference to the general public education on healthy eating. Such a system should also pay attention to the importance of a healthy diet and sufficient physical activity. The system should be accessible to all and should be maintained centrally.