



# Out of Sight, Out of Mind?

Young people's recall of health information and messaging on food packaging and advertising, and what information they want to see

April 2021

Together we will beat cancer

# Executive Summary

Almost a quarter of children in England start reception overweight or with obesity, rising to more than one in three children when they leave primary school.<sup>1</sup> Obesity among children and young people is not only associated with poor emotional and psychological health, but a child with obesity is five times more likely than one without to have obesity as an adult,<sup>2</sup> and therefore potentially at greater risk of morbidity, disability and premature mortality in adulthood – including cancer.<sup>3, 4</sup>

## Food labelling can help guide consumers to healthier options...

Food and drink packaging provides a cost-effective, high-reach opportunity to communicate product information, health messages, and health warnings (hereafter ‘health information’), through mechanisms such as labelling. The type of information this can encompass is broad, from nutritional information to serving suggestions to information on eating a balanced diet. As a policy intervention, it has the potential to guide consumers towards healthier options.

Under the UK’s current system, mandatory nutritional information must be shown on the back of the pack.<sup>5</sup> Voluntary front of pack labelling has been in place since 2013, reportedly adopted by two-thirds of the UK’s packaged food and drink market.<sup>6</sup> However, the front of pack system used varies from product to product so, despite fairly high uptake, there is a lack of consistency.

## ...Including young people

Young people come into contact frequently with pre-packaged food.<sup>7</sup> Desire to eat healthily is an influencing factor over their food choice,<sup>8</sup> and autonomy over their food choices increases with age.<sup>9</sup> This presents an opportunity for health information on

packaging to guide young people towards healthier food options.

Despite this opportunity, young people find current labelling inadequate and misleading, and are supportive of clearer labelling.<sup>8</sup>

## An opportunity to improve

The UK’s exit from the European Union, which has regulated our health labelling to date,<sup>6</sup> and the UK Government’s recent consultation on front of pack labelling<sup>10</sup> presents an opportunity to review how the UK’s current system of providing health information is working and ways it could be improved. The recent Health and Social Care White Paper makes clear that the Government is committed to bringing forward changes.

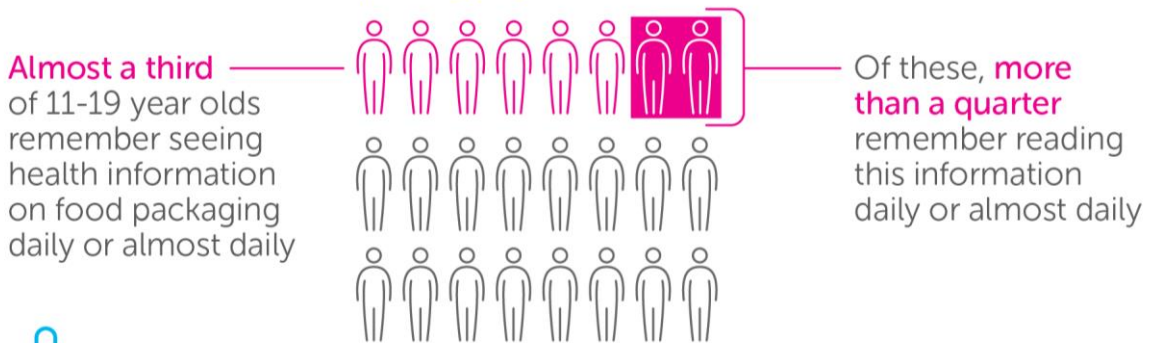
Using data from a 2019 UK-wide survey of 11-19 year olds (hereafter ‘young people’), this report examines whether the UK’s current system of providing health information is reaching and engaging young people, and what information young people want to see. In doing so, this report aims to support the development of labelling which is effective with this age group.

## Key findings

### Young people have low recall of seeing and reading health information on food packaging

Of the 3,394 young people surveyed, almost a third (31%) recalled seeing health information on food packaging daily or almost daily. Of these who had recalled seeing health information, more than a quarter (29%) recalled reading or looking closely at it. This suggests there is the potential for increasing the reach and engagement that health information on packaging has with this age group.

## Young people have low recall of seeing and reading health information on food packaging



Recall was lower among younger ages compared to older teenagers

### This recall is even lower for health information in food advertising

While young people's recall of health information on food packaging is low, it is even lower in advertising: almost a tenth (8%) of young people recalled seeing health information in advertising daily or almost daily and, of these, around one in seven (15%) recalled reading this information or looking closely at it.

### Young people see HFSS foods as unhealthy...

When given a list of 14 foods typically high in fat, salt and/or sugar (HFSS), almost eight in ten (78%) young people identified ten or more foods as very or somewhat unhealthy. Energy drinks, cakes, sweets/chocolate and sugary drinks were all perceived as unhealthy by more than 90% of young people.

### ...But not milk-based drinks and flavoured yoghurts

The exceptions were milk-based drinks, which around a third (34%) of young people identified as unhealthy, and flavoured yoghurts, which around a quarter (26%) identified as unhealthy. These two foods were also those with highest levels of

ambiguity: around a third of young people said milk-based drinks (33%) and flavoured yoghurts (31%) were neither healthy nor unhealthy. This may be due in part to misidentification of the healthiness of these foods, but it should be noted that these categories do also contain non-HFSS products which young people could have been recalling.

### Young people agree that health information should be displayed on packaging...

When asked whether nine types of information should be shown on packaging, agreement was highest for information on allergies (89% strongly or somewhat agreed), ingredients and additives (86%), and nutritional information (85%). All this information is currently mandatory, suggesting that the current information displayed does align with what young people want to see, but the low levels of recalled exposure and engagement suggest how this information is communicated could be improved.

Young people who agreed with the statements tended to agree with multiple forms of information; 83% of young people agreed with half or more of the statements.

## Most young people identify HFSS foods as unhealthy

Out of 14 typically HFSS foods, **78%** of young people\* identified ten or more as unhealthy. Perceptions of healthiness varied by food type:

**More than 90%** saw energy drinks, cakes, sugary drinks, sweets or chocolate as unhealthy



**Around a third** saw milk-based drinks as unhealthy



**Around a quarter** saw flavoured yoghurts as unhealthy



\*Aged 11-19

## ...Including clear and easy to see front-of-pack nutritional information...

More than eight in ten (81%) young people agreed that clear and easy to see nutritional information on the front of the pack – information which is currently voluntary and inconsistently applied – should be present on packaging.

## ...And information on calories...

Calorie information was also a top choice amongst young people, with more than eight in ten (81%) agreeing that this information should be displayed on packaging. Calorie information is currently mandatory on food packaging, but again, high agreement among young people for having this information but low recall of seeing or reading it suggests that how this information is communicated on packaging could be improved.

## ...But not exercise or eating a balanced diet

Agreement amongst young people was lowest for information on exercising regularly (49%) and on eating a balanced and healthy diet (63%).

## Differences across demographic groups is a priority for further research

A successful system of providing health information is one which is effective with everyone, including those with weaker nutritional knowledge, so demographic differences are a key consideration in improving how information is communicated.

This study provides a starting point for understanding how young people may engage with health information differently, and suggests there are differences by ethnicity and may be differences by deprivation in young people's perception of food healthiness and agreement with having health information on packaging. More research is needed to better understand these differences and inform development of new labelling systems.

## What should government do?

The UK's current system of providing health information is not reaching or engaging all young people, and may even be exacerbating health inequalities. Young people themselves have given a clear steer to focus more on certain types of health information, such as

front-of-pack and calorie labelling, over the more general advocations for a balanced diet and greater exercise favoured by parts of the food industry.

**UK and devolved Governments' approach to health information should better reflect the views, and meet the public health needs, of consumers.**

Including health information on packaging has the potential to guide people towards healthier options, including at the point of purchase and consumption. Labelling which is effective in equipping young people to make these decisions is therefore an important policy intervention.

The UK's current system of nutrition labelling must be improved to maximise its effectiveness with this age group.

**We are calling for the front of pack label chosen through the UK Government's consultation process to be made mandatory across all pre-packaged food and drink, on pack or at point of purchase. A mandatory system would create a level playing field and ensure that consistent information is available to all consumers across all products.**

Eating healthily also goes beyond these immediate purchase decisions. Policy action is needed to address the many other factors which makes it hard to be healthy, including: adverts and price promotions for unhealthy foods, tempting checkout deals, products high in fat, salt and sugar, bigger portions and the convenience of fast food. These, and many other environmental and systemic factors, contribute to the high levels of

overweight and obesity in the UK.

Thus, improving health information is a vital part of a wider package of measures needed to reduce obesity levels. Reducing young people's exposure to adverts for less healthy products should be the priority, given the way it influences their food choices; and how any health information is either absent from or over-ridden by the frequency and impact of that marketing.

**It is necessary for the UK Government to follow through on its commitments and introduce advertising restrictions on TV and online for junk food adverts, and a ban on price and location promotions for HFSS products, in order to tackle some of the key factors which contribute to the high levels of excess weight in the UK.**

UK and devolved Governments are currently finalising the details of which types of HFSS products the marketing and promotions restrictions would apply to. This study highlights that young people are generally adept at identifying categories which consist mainly of less healthy food and drink, and these also closely match those under consideration.

**The UK Government should hold firm and ensure all the main contributors of calories and sugar to young people's diets – those categories in Public Health England's sugar and calorie reduction programme – are within the scope of the forthcoming HFSS marketing and promotions restrictions. Devolved government should do likewise when they introduce similar HFSS promotions restrictions.**

## Report Reference

This report should be referred to as follows:

Newberry Le Vay, J., Critchlow, N., Froguel, A., Clark, M., Newman, A., Vohra, J. “Out of sight, out of mind? Young people’s recall of health information and messaging on food packaging and advertising, and what information they want to see.” 2021. Cancer Research UK.

## Acknowledgements

We thank ScotCen for their qualitative work which underpinned the design of this survey, and YouGov for their work on supporting survey design and data collection.

Thank you to CRUK colleagues for providing input and steer into the development of the study and report: Sophia Lowes, Katrina Brown, Ian Caleb, Karen Fitzgerald and Lauren Richardson. We thank Dr Jean Adams, University of Cambridge, Dr Ada Garcia, University of Glasgow and Dr Asha Kaur, University of Oxford for sharing their expertise with us in providing external peer review.

## Cancer Research UK

Cancer Research UK is the world’s largest independent cancer charity dedicated to saving lives through research. We support research into all aspects of cancer through the work of over 4,000 scientists, doctors and nurses. In 2018/19, we committed £546 million to fund and facilitate research in institutes, hospitals and universities across the UK. Thanks to research, survival in the UK has doubled since the 1970s so, today, 2 in 4 people survive their cancer. Our ambition is to accelerate progress and see 3 in 4 patients surviving their cancer by 2034. This research was funded by the Cancer Policy Research Centre, Cancer Research UK.



Cancer Research UK is a registered charity in England and Wales (1089464), Scotland (SC041666) and the Isle of Man (1103)

<http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/>

## References

1. NHS Digital, *National Child Measurement Programme, England 2019/20 School Year*. 2020.
2. Simmonds, M., A. Llewellyn, C.G. Owen, et al., *Predicting adult obesity from childhood obesity: a systematic review and meta-analysis*. *Obes Rev*, 2016. **17**(2): p. 95-107. DOI: 10.1111/obr.12334.
3. Public Health England, *Childhood obesity: applying All Our Health*. 2020.
4. Brown, K.F., H. Rumgay, C. Dunlop, et al., *The fraction of cancer attributable to modifiable risk factors in England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and the United Kingdom in 2015*. *British Journal of Cancer*, 2018. **118**(8): p. 1130-1141. DOI: 10.1038/s41416-018-0029-6.
5. Department of Health, *Technical guidance on nutrition labelling*. 2017.
6. Department of Health and Social Care, *The UK's Voluntary Front of Pack Nutrition Labelling Scheme*, Department of Health and Social Care. 2018.
7. Thomas, C., L. Hooper, G. Rosenberg, et al., *Under Pressure: New evidence on young people's broadcast marketing exposure in the UK*. 2018, Cancer Research UK.
8. MacGregor, A., K. Attygalle, J. Shields, et al., *Still Under Pressure; But Pressing for Change*. 2019, Cancer Research UK.
9. Fitzgerald, A., C. Heary, E. Nixon, et al., *Factors influencing the food choices of Irish children and adolescents: a qualitative investigation*. *Health Promot Int*, 2010. **25**(3): p. 289-298. DOI: 10.1093/heapro/daq021.
10. UK Government, *Front-of-pack nutrition labelling in the UK: building on success*. 2020.