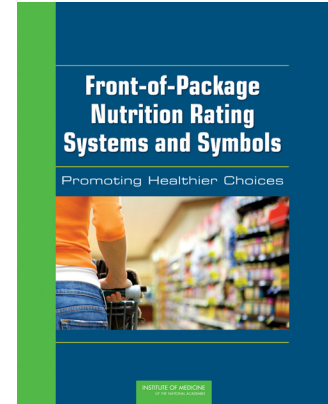


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# Front-of-Package Nutrition Rating Systems and Symbols

## Promoting Healthier Choices



**Over the past ten years,** a variety of nutrition symbols and ratings systems have found their way to the front of food packaging—all aimed at providing consumers with information about the nutritional value and overall healthfulness of the product inside. Although their purpose is to simplify the choices for consumers, making it easier for people to make healthful selections, these “front-of-package” (FOP) labels may result in more confusion among purchasers.

In light of the persistent disconnect between dietary recommendations and Americans’ actual diets, Congress directed the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to undertake a study with the Institute of Medicine (IOM). The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion in the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) later joined as sponsors. The IOM appointed a committee to the task, which was split into two phases: 1) to analyze current nutrition rating systems and the scientific research that underlies them, which took place in Phase I, and 2) to outline the benefits of a single, simple food guidance system on the front of packages that best promotes health and will be useful to consumers—the subject of this report.

The committee concludes that it is time for a fundamental shift in strategy, a move away from systems that mostly provide nutrition information without clear guidance about its healthfulness, and toward one that encourages healthier food choices through simplicity, visual clarity, and the ability to convey meaning without written information. An FOP system should be standardized and it also should motivate food and beverage companies to reformulate their products to be healthier and encourage food retailers to prominently display products that meet this standard.

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## Characteristics of a Model Front-of-Package System

The underlying concept of a model FOP system is similar to that behind the Energy Star® program. This successful government-run labeling system uses a simple symbol to identify equipment and materials that meet certain standards of energy efficiency. The IOM committee found that FOP systems that are simple and easy to understand are more effective at encouraging healthier product choices, particularly when consumer must choose among many types of products.

The committee describes a successful FOP symbol system as:

- **Simple:** not requiring specific or sophisticated nutritional knowledge to understand the meaning
- **Interpretive:** nutrition information provided as guidance rather than as specific facts
- **Ordinal:** offering nutritional guidance by using a scaled or ranking system
- **Supported by communication:** with readily remembered names or identifiable symbols

## Recommendation for an FOP Symbol System

The committee recommends that the FDA and the USDA develop, test, and implement a single, standard FOP system to appear on all products, replacing any existing system. The system should have the following characteristics:

- One simple, standard symbol translating information from the Nutrition Facts panel (NFP) on each product into a quickly and easily grasped health meaning, making healthier options unmistakable
- Displays:
  - Calories in common household measure serving sizes (shelf tags to be used on

bulk items such as fruits and vegetables as well as packaged goods)

- Zero to three nutritional “points” (for saturated and *trans* fats, sodium, and added sugars)
- Appears on all grocery products, allowing consumers to compare food choices across and within categories (determination for universal implementation of the symbol system must be preceded by consumer testing and conducted in conjunction with education and promotion program)
- Appears in a consistent location across products
- Practical to implement by being consistent with existing nutrition labeling regulations
- Integrated with the NFP so that the FOP symbol system and the NFP are mutually reinforcing
- Provides a non-proprietary, transparent translation of nutrition information into health meaning
- Made prominent and useful to consumers through an ongoing and frequently refreshed program of promotion integrating the efforts of all concerned parties

For products not meeting the eligibility and qualifying criteria for an FOP symbol, the system should display calorie and serving size information.

## Nutrient Components and Criteria for Measuring Them

According to the report, calories in household servings should appear on all products. Saturated and *trans* fats, sodium, and added sugars should form the basis of the symbol system. The committee developed an approach to evaluate saturated and *trans* fats, and sodium—nutrients strongly associated with the most pressing diet-related

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health concerns, and added sugars, which the 2010 *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* recommends that consumers reduce or avoid. The criteria for evaluating nutrients for the system should be transparent and non-proprietary and should be based on widely available evidence.

The committee's process for evaluating these nutrients in an FOP system occurs in two steps:

1. *Eligible or not?* If a food or beverage contains any one of the critical nutrients in amounts above a threshold limit, the product is not eligible for earning FOP "points"—an indicator of whether a critical nutrient met defined criteria.
2. *If eligible, for how many points?* A product that is eligible is evaluated for FOP points for saturated and *trans* fats, sodium, and added sugars based on qualifying criteria that assess amounts of the nutrient. If one, two, or all three nutrients are present in a small enough quantity to meet the qualifying criteria, the product earns one, two, or three FOP points, respectively. For example, 100 percent whole wheat bread could earn all three points, graham crackers could earn two points for fats and sodium, and an oat and peanut butter bar could earn one point for sodium. The more points earned, the more a product helps consumers avoid harmful amounts of these nutrients, which have been linked to obesity, diabetes, and high blood pressure among other illnesses.

## Next Steps

Once implemented, the FOP system should be regularly monitored and evaluated in order to continually improve its success in directing consumers' food purchases toward healthier choices. Implementation of the system should include a multi-stakeholder, multi-faceted awareness and promotion campaign that includes ongoing monitoring, research, and evaluation. Determination for universal implementation of the symbol system must be preceded by consumer testing and conducted in conjunction with an education and promotion program.

## Conclusion

The time has come for a fundamental shift in the way information about the healthfulness of foods is presented on the front of food packages. The IOM recommends a single, standardized FOP system that can be easily understood by most consumers and that would appear on every product. Ultimately, a new FOP system that helps both simplify and clarify the information provided about foods could help bring to an end the confusion that many people have about food choices—resulting in more informed and healthier decisions. 🍌



## Committee on Examination of Front-of-Package Nutrition Rating Systems and Symbols

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