

Singapore's Nutri-Grade labelling influences consumers to make healthier choices: Study

26 March 2023 | News

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Singapore's new mandatory labelling system—called Nutri-Grade (NG)—is likely to encourage consumers to purchase beverages with lower sugar content, suggests a trial by researchers at Duke-NUS Medical School.

Instituted by the Singapore government in December 2022, the colour-coded NG labelling system was introduced to help consumers identify healthier drinks. The new front-of-pack NG system currently grades pre-packed beverages on a four-point scale, from A (lowest in sugar and saturated fat) to D (highest in sugar and saturated fat).

In the study, which was conducted before the official implementation of the NG labelling system, the research team recruited 138 participants to shop for groceries in their experimental online grocery store called NUSMart. This online store mimics real web-based grocery stores in Singapore and has already been used in other research publications.

To evaluate whether the NG labels affect what consumers purchased, the participants were exposed to two different shopping experiences— with or without the new NG labels on pre-packaged beverages in the presence of the Healthier Choice Symbol logos.

“The results revealed that the NG labels were effective in increasing purchases of beverages that were rated A or B—the healthier drinks,” said Dr Soye Shin, health economist from Duke-NUS Health Services and Systems Research (HSSR) programme and first author and principal investigator of the study. “Compared to what was bought during the shopping experience without the NG labels, those bought with the NG labels had a reduced sugar content of 1.5 grams per serving.”

But the study showed that there were no significant differences in the total calories, saturated fat or other nutrients present in the purchased goods—likely because beverages account for a small part of the total shopping basket.

“This reveals the limits of a labelling system focussing on only pre-packaged beverages,” added Prof Finkelstein, who is also a health economist with Duke-NUS. “The government has recognised this and will be expanding Nutri-Grade to freshly prepared beverages by the end of 2023.”

For the Duke-NUS research team, the next step will be to evaluate the NG system’s effects using real-world consumer data.