



Nutritional labelling of fast food

Should fast food nutritional labelling in South Africa be mandatory?

In countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, Ireland, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Taiwan, and United Arab Emirates, provision of fast food nutritional information is mandatory to the public. However, South African fast food restaurants are not compelled to provide any form of nutritional information.

A study, entitled “Should fast food nutritional labelling be mandatory in South Africa,” and supported by the DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Human Development, was recently conducted at the University of the Witwatersrand. One of the aims of the study was to determine the proportion of the largest South African fast food restaurants (based on the BusinessTech 2017 and 2018 annual reviews) that had nutritional information. The study shows that only 58% of the the included South African fast food companies in the study (n = 18) have nutritional information available to the public. This is accessible either through a restaurant’s website or made available to the public on request.

The study also aimed to describe the nutritional information of a standard fast food item (burgers or pizzas) and meal combination (burger/pizza + medium fried chips + a sugar sweetened beverage 440 ml) across the fast-food restaurants. Energy, fat, salt and sugar, varied widely amongst similar fast-food items (burgers, pizzas and fried chips), highlighting the importance of nutritional labelling.

This is in contrast to popular belief that similar foods contain similar nutrients. While burgers and pizzas were high in protein, some were also high in fat and salt, as indicated by percentages of the nutritional reference ranges above 30% level. All meal combinations exacerbated the total energy, carbohydrates, sugar, and salt content, and mostly fat. Therefore, the findings from the study suggests that consumption of fast foods may contribute disproportionately to daily nutrient intakes for energy, fat, salt, and sugar, especially when eaten as meal combinations, as these often exceed the daily recommended intakes for a meal.

In addition, the “traffic light system” was utilised by the study to showcase the quantity of each nutrient, and whether this was high (red), medium (orange), or low (green). While the availability of nutritional information is important, it is equally important that fast food nutritional information labelling be easy to understand and recognisable by consumers. Therefore the traffic light approach could help consumers to interpret and understand the nutritional value of different meals and in turn increase their awareness and consideration around dietary choices.

Certainly, the nutritional information of fast food can be used by consumers to make healthier dietary choices and in turn assist the government to mitigate obesity and related non-communicable diseases, such as diabetes and hypertension.

Diets high in fat, sugar, and salt are correlated with the rise in non-communicable diseases (NCDs) which are a leading cause of mortality in adults.

Therefore, consumers may benefit from understanding how choosing to purchase fast food items or combination meals

contribute to their dietary intake of fat, salt and sugar and overall energy intake. Furthermore, government regulation to mandate nutritional labelling of fast foods in South Africa may be an important component of their health strategy to reduce NCDs in South Africa. Particularly, if the labelling is clear and easily interpretable.

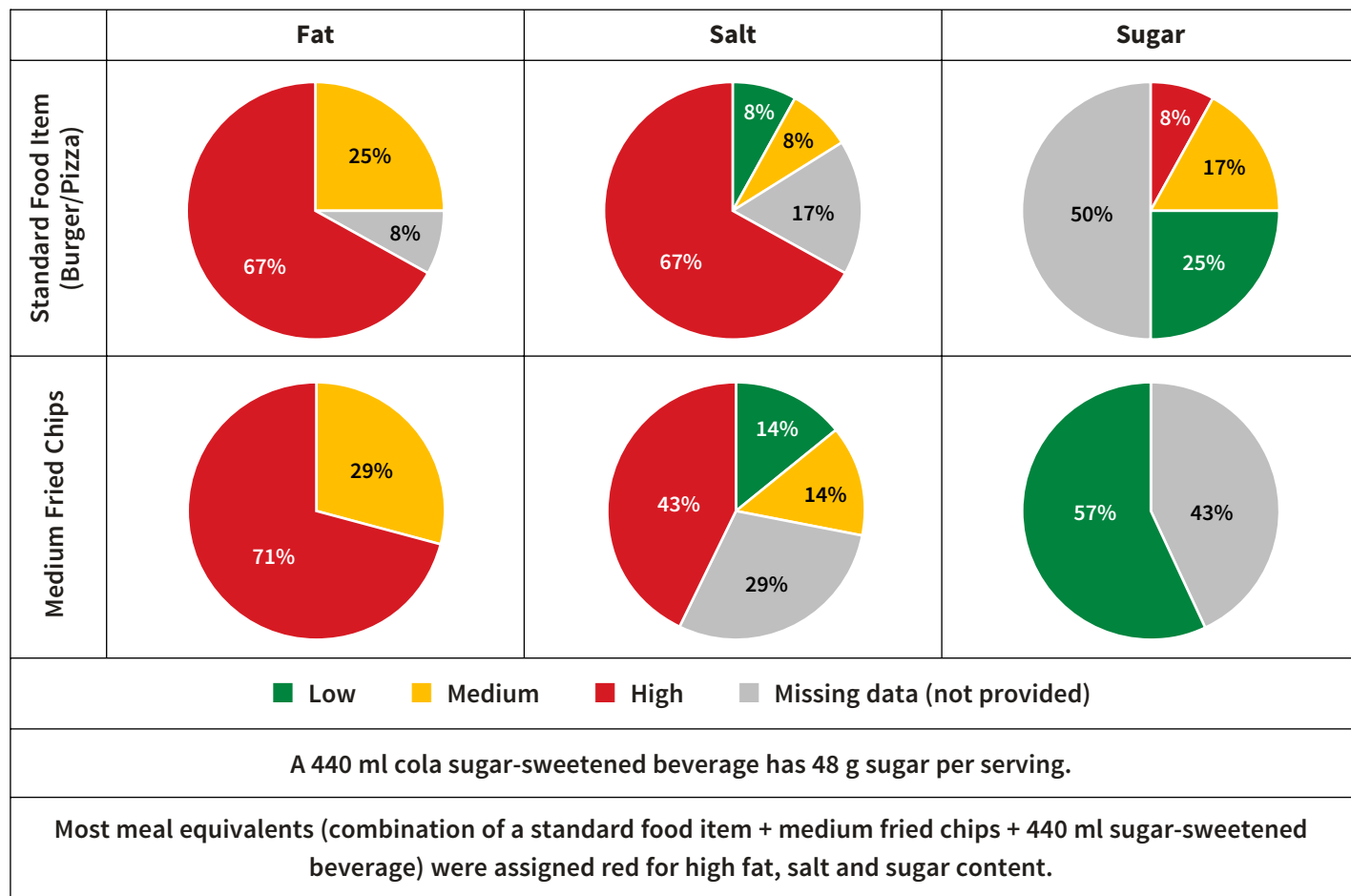


Figure 1: Assigned traffic light colours for the South African fast foods. (Red: High; Amber: Medium; Green: Low; Light grey: Colour could not be assigned due to missing information). The majority of the standard fast food items (burgers/pizzas) and medium fried chips are high in fat and salt content. While sugar content is relatively low in burgers, pizzas and medium fried chips, inclusion of a sugar-sweetened beverage in a meal combination ensures high sugar content in fast foods. There is some missing nutritional information as many of the South African fast food restaurants do not provide nutrient values per 100 g, which is required for the “traffic light” classification.

Reference:

Should fast food nutritional labelling in South Africa be mandatory?

Siphiwe N Dlamini^{1*}, Gudani Mukoma¹, Shane A Norris^{1, 2}

¹SAMRC/Wits Developmental Pathways for Health Research Unit, School of Clinical Medicine, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

²Global Health Research Institute, School of Health and Human Development, University of Southampton, UK

*Corresponding author, email: siphiwe.dlamini2@wits.ac.za