



# Traffic Light Labelling:

Making healthy food choices  
easier for Australians



AMA



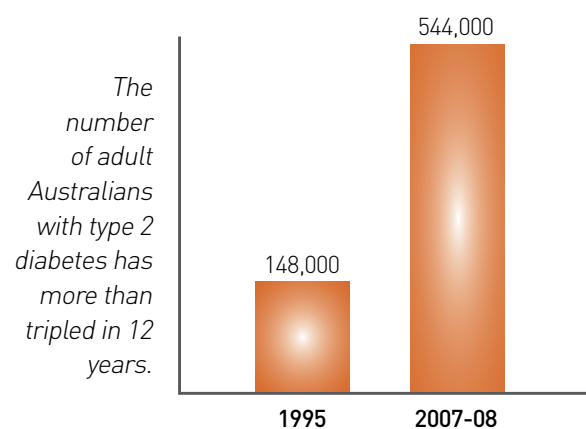
## Australia has one of the highest rates of obesity in the world, and it continues to grow.

A growing number of Australians are at high risk of serious diseases and premature death from the epidemic of obesity occurring in Australia.

Obesity is a significant health problem globally, but especially in Australia. Over one quarter of the world's population is overweight or obese (28.6 per cent). In comparison, an alarming two-thirds of adult Australians are overweight or obese (62 per cent), and Australia has the fifth highest rate of adult obesity among all OECD countries (25 per cent of adults). According to recent National Health Surveys, these Australian rates continue to rise.

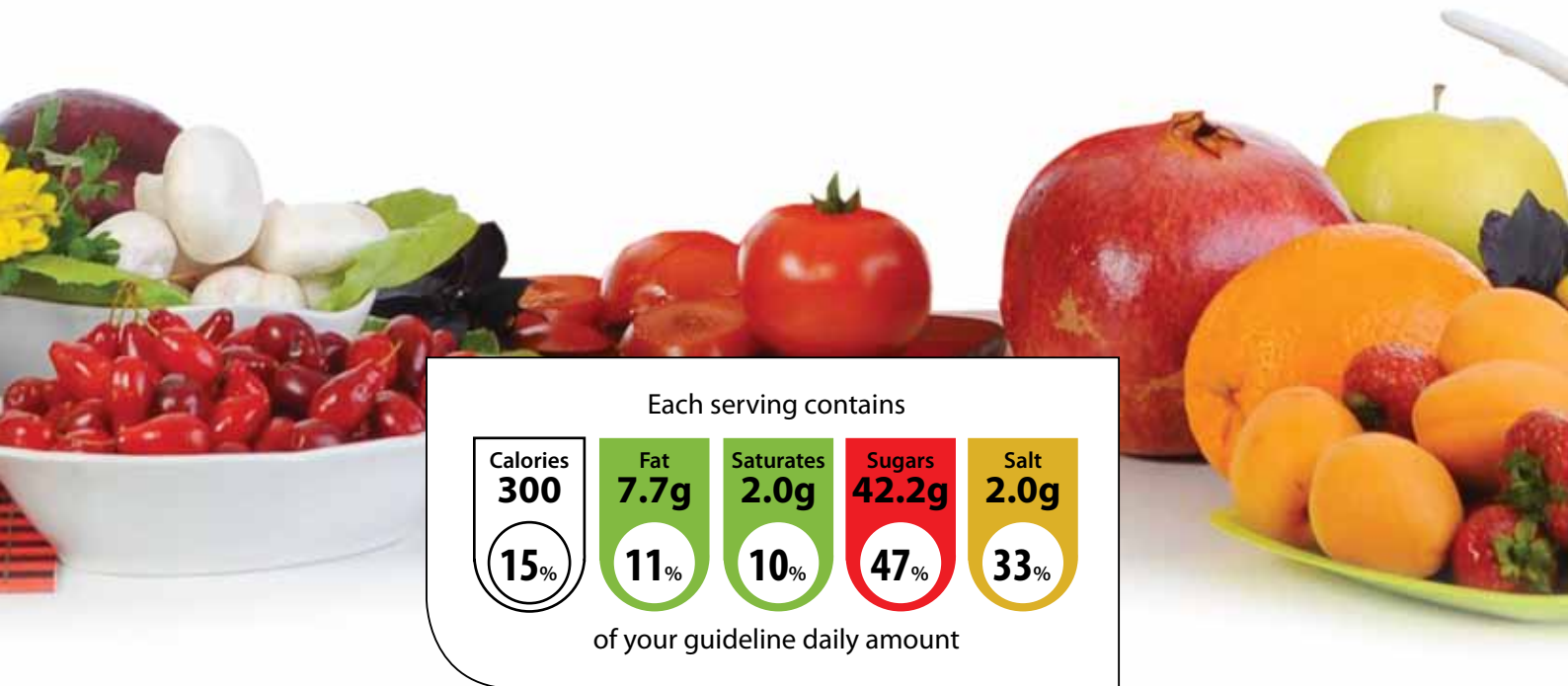
Australia's children are also at risk. Twenty-three per cent of Australian children between 2 and 16 years of age are obese or overweight. These children are very likely to become obese as adults, and experience serious health conditions such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure and a range of cancers. There are high rates of these health conditions in Australia, and

they have significant social and personal costs. In 2005, an estimated \$1.6 billion was borne by State and Federal Governments as a result of obesity.



**Estimated Number of Australian Adults with Type 2 Diabetes**

[Source: ABS 2010]



The food people consume is a major factor in obesity. It needs to be easier for people to make healthier choices about what they eat.

There is an emerging view among experts that the global decline in people's level of physical activity is insufficient to explain the rise in obesity. However, there is a strong global correlation between rising rates of obesity and changes in the food supply system, which is producing food products that are more processed, cheaper, and more effectively marketed than ever before.

People have become busier and less engaged with growing and preparing foods and, as a result, are

more dependent on manufactured foods. This often means people are consuming more energy overall, and high levels of problem ingredients such as saturated fats, salt and sugar which are found in many highly processed foods.

**Tackling rising rates of obesity in Australia requires improving our patterns of food and drink consumption. Consumers need to be empowered to choose healthy food options.**

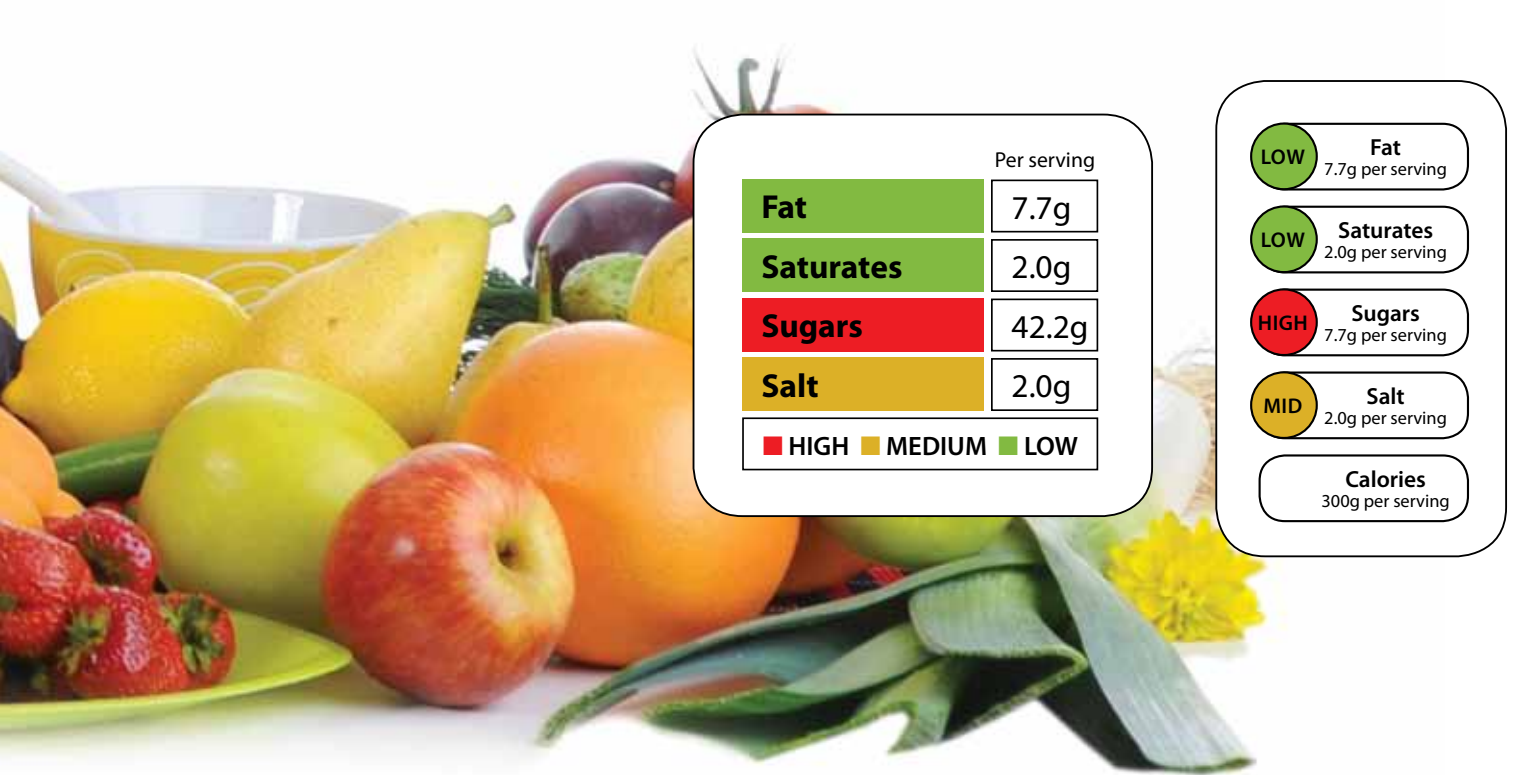
To make healthier food choices, people need effective food labelling that provides the right health information in the right way.

Many consumers say they lack the time to read food labels. Research shows that consumers will, on average, spend between four and ten seconds choosing a product from the supermarket shelf, and will ignore information on labels altogether if it is too complex or detailed.

When making purchasing decisions, consumers are often faced with an overwhelming array of products and options within product categories. The big problem for the vast majority of Australians is knowing which of these foods and drinks, and in what amounts, are appropriate, and which are not.

Food labels are often used by manufacturers to make their products more appealing, by highlighting price, taste, healthiness or other claimed benefits. Nutritional information has to compete with these for consumers' attention. Effective nutritional food labelling must be readily seen and easy to understand, to help people make quick and accurate comparisons.

**Making the best choices means being able to easily compare the healthiness of different products and brands, and to separate out the relevant health information from the marketing hype.**



## Current food labelling in Australia fails the test and needs to be changed.

Most packaged foods and drinks in Australia are required to display the Nutritional Information Panel. This little panel provides information on energy, protein, total fat, saturated fat, carbohydrate, sugars and sodium, in both 'per serve' and 'per 100gm / ml' measures. The Nutritional Information Panel includes a listing of ingredients, and may also provide allergen information. It is not usually placed in a

prominent position on the product label, and text can be small, particularly on small packages.

**Studies show that many consumers find the Nutritional Information Panel too technical, difficult to understand, and confusing, if not misleading.** Information based on the Nutritional Information Panel 'serving sizes' does not always reflect real life consumption patterns.

## Front-of-pack labelling is the right approach, but not all forms are effective.

Surveys show that Australian consumers prefer a single approach to labelling, which should be on the front of the pack, with health information that can be easily interpreted and compared and conveyed immediately.

The Percentage Daily Intake system of 'thumbnails' indicates the contribution of energy, protein, total fat, saturated fat, total carbohydrate, sugar, and sodium, provided by the serve of food as a percentage of the daily recommended intake (based on the estimated nutrient intake for a 70 kg adult male). This system has been voluntarily adopted by a number of food producers.

However, a survey conducted on behalf of the Australian Food and Grocery Council found that

while three quarters of surveyed consumers had heard of the Percentage Daily Intake system, the majority had not used it to make a purchasing decision, and nearly half believed that Percentage Daily Intake did not provide the type of nutritional information they needed to make a decision. Research conducted by the food producer Sanitarium shows the Percentage Daily Intake system to be the least preferred, least understood and least useful approach to front-of-pack labelling. Other research on the Percentage Daily Intake shows that consumers do not find the information meaningful enough for a good decision, and the typically small size makes the thumbnail virtually unnoticeable.

# It's time to improve food choices and tackle obesity with a Traffic Light system of front-of-pack labelling.

The Traffic Light system of labelling provides easily interpreted information using color codes. Red, amber and green 'traffic light' shapes on the front of food packages show consumers, at a glance, whether a product is high, medium or low in fat, saturated fat, sugar, and salt (and possibly overall energy). This makes it easy to identify healthier food choices (green or amber lights, rather than red). Traffic Light Labels can be represented in a number of ways on food packets, but their meaning will always be clear. They can also be supplemented with other nutritional or Percentage Daily Intake information.

Traffic Light Labels enhance the ability of consumers to make healthier food choices. When comparing similar food products, consumers are five times more likely to correctly identify the healthier products when using Traffic Light Labels compared to a Percentage Daily Intake system. Consumers also report being able to compare products and make these judgements much faster when products have Traffic Light Labels.

This system of labelling also commands high levels of understanding and acceptability across

ethnic and income groups, which is consistent with the Food Regulation Ministerial Council Front of Pack Labelling Policy Statement 2009. Traffic Light Labels would be particularly beneficial for consumers with different language backgrounds.

Traffic Light Labelling has the capacity to benefit the entire population by increasing overall consumer demand for healthier products. Following the introduction of Traffic Light Labels in the UK, sales of breakfast cereals with green and amber lights grew twice as fast, and pre-prepared frozen meals with red lights experienced a 35 per cent decrease in sales.

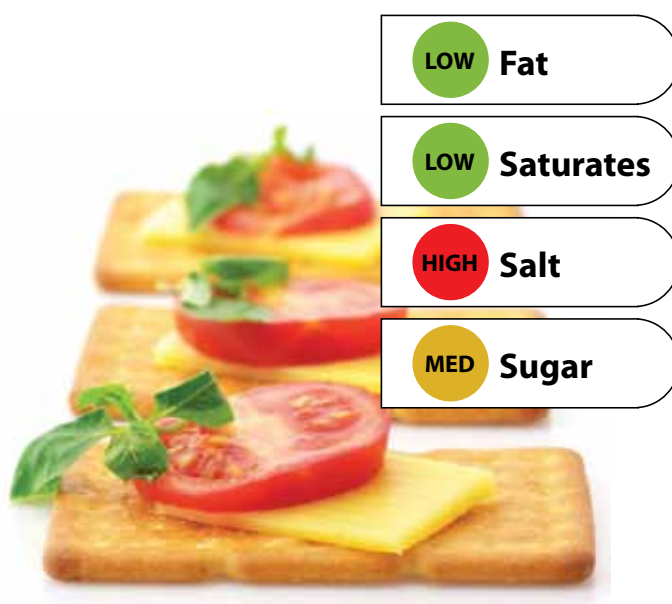
These early outcomes show that Traffic Light Labelling has the potential to change our patterns of food supply and consumption - which is exactly what is needed to halt the rising rates of obesity in Australia.

The benefits of the Traffic Light Labelling system have also been recognised in 2011 by the independent Panel for the Review of Food Labelling Law and Policy commissioned by the Australia and New Zealand Food Regulation Ministerial Council.

## It should not be left to food manufacturers to decide if they want to use Traffic Light Labels.

If the decision is left to manufacturers, Traffic Light Labels might appear on some products, but not others. Others might decide not to use these labels at all, or maybe for a short time. Representatives of the food industry currently favour Percentage Daily Intake labels, and some manufacturers are using it already, despite its shortcomings. All of this means that a voluntary approach will lead to unpredictability, inconsistency, public confusion and failure. The strong promise of a successful system such as Traffic Light labels should not be jeopardised in this way. The health of Australians should not be left to the whims and decisions of food manufacturers.

Further details about these facts can be found in *Traffic Light Food Labelling - The Evidence* on the AMA website at <http://ama.com.au/traffic-light-labelling-the-evidence>.



**The facts are clear. The AMA believes that the Government must mandate traffic light labelling on packaged food and drink products. Without this system, the community will continue to pay the rising price of poor food choices.**



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