

Last day for public comments on food labels

Today is the last day for consumers to submit their comments in favour of new and bolder front-of-package warning labels that will inform them of packaged food that is high in salt, sugar, saturated fat and contains artificial sweeteners.



Source: [Pexels](#)

The Department of Health (DoH) gazetted the draft Regulations Relating to the Labelling and Advertising of Foodstuffs in January 2023 and has made the document available for public comment.

The Healthy Living Alliance (Heala), a civil society organisation advocating for a more just food system, has welcomed the regulations which propose the mandatory use of warning labels on unhealthy packaged food.

Nzama Mbalati, programmes manager at Heala, says: “Heala is committed to mobilising communities to ensure policymakers take their concerns about unhealthy food consumption, and the need for warning labels to help them make more informed food decisions, seriously.”

Healthy diets, WHO-approved

The draft regulations are in line with World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations for a healthy diet, which include limiting saturated fat consumption, limiting daily salt intake and limiting intake of free or added sugars.

Overconsumption of saturated fats, salt and sugar can lead to people being overweight or obese, and can cause a range of diet-related noncommunicable diseases such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes and some cancers.

“We believe that food regulation is at the centre of encouraging and empowering consumers to make healthier food choices in line with the World Health Organisation’s recommendation for better regulation on the food environment,” says Mbalati.

“Front-of-package warning labels, in the shape of a black triangle, allow consumers to see the ingredients of a product at a glance, helping to increase their knowledge and change attitudes towards nutrition and health, and can help to reduce levels of diet-related disease.”

“ *Local evidence shows positive attitudes among South African consumers, finding warning labels easy to understand and helpful in identifying unhealthy products.*

Read our latest conversation piece by [@sam_say16!@heala_SA](#) <https://t.co/KP6GchfWiN> — Priceless SA (@WitsPricelessSA) [July 20, 2023](#) ”

Current information on food packages can be misleading and challenging for consumers to read and understand. The regulations therefore aim to make far-reaching changes to the way food items are labelled on store shelves in South Africa.

As part of an overhaul of naming changes, the regulations propose that descriptors like “wholesome”, “nutritious”, “nutraceutical” or “super-food” be prohibited from labelling, as well as words, labels and images that in any way suggest that the food is better, or superior would also be prohibited under the new rules.

Warning labels proposal: DoH

The DoH is also proposing that food items high in sugar and saturated fat content come with warning labels attached. It is demanding mandatory front-of-package food labelling (FoPL) to be present on all pre-packaged foodstuffs that contain added saturated fat, sugar and salt and which exceed the nutrient cut-off values for total sugar, total salt or total saturated fatty acids. Warning labels must also state the use of artificial sweeteners.

Warning labels indicating to consumers which products contain excessive amounts of sugars, total fats, saturated fats, trans fats, and salt must display such information on the front of the package – and warning labels will have to cover 25% of the front of the package.

“The draft regulations are encouraging,” says Mbalati. “Processed foods contain high amounts of added sugar, salt, unhealthy fats, and chemical additives, all of which can negatively affect children’s health.



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Katja Hamilton 19 Apr 2023



“These foods not only increase the risk of obesity and health problems, but also displace nutrient-dense whole foods in children’s diets, leading to deficiencies in vital micronutrients. The regulations will help consumers to be better informed about what they are feeding their families and will help them to limit processed foods and prioritise whole, fresh foods for their children’s health and wellbeing.”

Survey supports food labeling

A 2018 study in the Western Cape found that 80% of foods in South African supermarkets were ultra-processed. A public

opinion survey, commissioned by The Community Media Trust and Vital Strategies in 2022, evaluating people's response to Heala's FoPL mass-media campaign to mobilise public support for front-of-package labels, found that there was strong public support for government action to regulate unhealthy food access.

According to the survey, 81% of participants were very supportive of the South African government's plans to implement front-of-package warning labels, 77% of participants supported campaigns that reveal the high content of sugar, saturated fat and salt in food and beverages and warn of the health consequences, 61% agreed that it is difficult to know whether food is healthy or not if it is not clearly labelled, and half of the participants agreed that it is difficult to know if packaged food is healthy or not.



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"More than 13% of South African children aged 6 to 14 years are overweight which is higher than the 10% prevalence in school children globally," says Mbalati. "This is particularly troubling because extra kilos often start children on the path to health problems that were once considered adult problems, including diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol. Childhood obesity can also lead to poor self-esteem and depression."

"It's encouraging that the DoH has heeded our call to introduce stronger FoPL on unhealthy food items and we commend its commitment to the safety of the South African public," says Mbalati.

"We believe that food regulation is at the centre of encouraging and empowering consumers to make healthier food choices in line with the WHO's recommendation for better regulation of the food environment.

"We hope that government will do the right thing and not capitulate to industry demands, as this will ensure that all people who live in South Africa are able to make informed choices. We urgently need to ensure nutritious food is accessible and available to all."

The proposed regulations can be read [Here](#) and link [here](#) for more information.

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