

No sugar, no problem? The limits of Singapore's Nutri-Grade labels

Consumers need to learn how to make better-informed decisions about what is truly healthy.

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There is a bright spot in the latest National Nutrition Survey. Even as calorie and sodium levels in consumption have gone up, the average daily sugar intake dropped from 60g in 2018 to 48g in 2025.

That encouraging downward trend is no accident, driven in part by a simple front-of-pack packaging nudge that many of us are familiar with by now. The Nutri-Grade label system assigns beverages a colour-coded grade on the front of the product, ranging from A to D based on the healthiness criteria of sugar and saturated fat.

Introduced at the end of 2022 to build on the voluntary Healthier Choice Symbol programme, mandatory Nutri-Grade labels reduced household sugar intake from prepackaged beverages by 18%, or about 3.1g per person daily, between 2019 and 2024.

Enabling consumers to make healthier choices easily about their drinks is important. Diabetes, driven largely by high intakes of sugar-sweetened beverages and refined carbohydrates, affects 700,000 adults.

But a new problem has emerged. A National University of Singapore study found that greater knowledge of the labels was associated with a higher intake of artificially sweetened beverages (ASB), but not necessarily a lower intake of sugar-sweetened beverages (SSB).

Artificial sweeteners are chemically made or plant-derived additives that provide a sweet taste like sugar while containing little or no calories. Those commonly used in ASBs are aspartame, acesulfame potassium (Ace-K), and sucralose. As they are hundreds of times sweeter than regular sugar, beverage manufacturers need to use only tiny amounts to achieve the same taste.

It appears that label awareness



Label awareness is prompting consumers to pivot towards "healthier" alternatives to sugary drinks, but does not reduce reliance on sweetened beverages, the writers say. PHOTO: SHIN MIN DAILY NEWS

alone is prompting consumers to pivot towards sugar-free alternatives, rather than reducing overall reliance on sugar-sweetened drinks.

We need to strengthen health literacy in consumers to be better aware of what is a truly healthy choice. Without this shift in mindset, consumers may simply swap one labelled product for another, rather than change how they think about everyday beverage choices.

SIMPLE LABELS, COMPLEX ISSUES

The simplicity of front-of-pack labels like Nutri-Grade is particularly useful for consumers with lower nutrition literacy, limited time or language barriers, and makes information more accessible across age groups.

But it inevitably loses some nuance in conveying context and important information such as portion size control and the potential health consequence of excess.

A drink labelled Grade B may be lower in sugar, but is not risk-free and is likely to contain artificial sweeteners. Yet, many consumers may interpret a Grade B drink as "healthy" rather than merely "healthier" and consume more of it.

The concern is that some are likely to end up consuming excessive calories from higher

intakes of perceived healthier products, negating the intended benefits.

Similarly, as the Healthier Choice Symbol permits the use of approved artificial sweeteners in products to meet sugar criteria, consumers often view the red logo as an absolute stamp of healthiness, rather than a relative option.

There are also the possible adverse health effects from long-term consumption of artificial sweeteners. While evidence does not show that they are harmful at specific intake levels below regulatory safety limits, they raise concerns about possible associations between long-term consumption and type 2 diabetes, heart disease and mortality.

Until stronger evidence emerges, they should not be viewed as risk-free or health-promoting.

It is also worth noting that a 2026 Singapore study shows that while average sugar content in drinks has declined, the share of products containing sweeteners has risen by 6%, suggesting that manufacturers are substituting sugar with alternative sweet-tasting compounds to avoid label penalties.

This substitution approach has been documented in countries such as Chile and Britain, where strong sugar-reduction policies

exist. This has raised concerns that policies aimed at reducing sugar may inadvertently increase population exposure to artificial sweeteners, and has prompted several reviews to examine the health implications.

Choices are also shaped by what is available on shelves. The widespread visibility of Grade B beverages in supermarkets, convenience stores and foodcourts makes them a convenient and default choice.

Some students have said that choosing A- or B-graded drinks helps them "fit into their peer groups", while choosing less-healthy C or D can be seen as a poorer or less desirable choice. So, for some population groups, Nutri-Grade has become equated with conformity to social norms and perhaps even status.

STRENGTHENING HEALTH LITERACY

Health risks may remain even when "healthier" options are selected. Public health communication should not assume that label recognition automatically translates into informed decision-making. Communication depends not just on awareness, but also on whether people trust, understand and act on risk information in meaningful ways.

If Nutri-Grade labels are to do

more than nudge consumers towards different beverage choices, efforts must extend beyond explaining what the labels mean. The next step is to move from awareness to practical decision-making and strengthening health literacy.

A key point is to understand that Nutri-Grade labels communicate relative healthfulness, helping consumers compare options rather than identify drinks that are unequivocally healthy. A sugar-free beverage is not necessarily risk-free, and while a Grade B may be a better choice, moderation in intake remains important.

Under current regulations, Nutri-Grade labels are mandatory only for beverages in Grades C

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and D, but optional for those in Grades A and B. Manufacturers of Grade B drinks containing added sweeteners, or up to 5g of sugar per 100ml, may simply omit the label, leading consumers to mistakenly classify them alongside zero-sugar Grade A options.

To reinforce the concept of relative healthfulness, one consideration would be to make Nutri-Grade labelling mandatory for all beverages, including those classified as Grade A and Grade B.

Healthy school meal programmes globally, including in Singapore, are also enforcing strict bans or limitations on artificial and intense sweeteners. This reflects concerns that regular exposure to extremely sweet products may condition children to develop a preference for sweetness and undermine the development of healthier long-term dietary habits.

A similar approach could be extended to workplaces and other institutional settings by limiting the availability and variety of ASBs offered for sale or through vending machines. In addition, existing strategies aimed at reducing the purchase and consumption of SSBs could be adapted and strengthened for ASBs.

These include increasing access to water coolers and refill stations, reducing the prominence of SSBs and ASBs at points of sale, promoting healthier beverage alternatives, and implementing stricter controls on vending machine offerings and beverage marketing practices.

If Nutri-Grade labels are to remain credible, they cannot remain static. Regular reviews and updates are essential to ensure that the criteria continue to reflect evolving scientific evidence and public health priorities.

Periodic revision also reduces the risk of manufacturers "gaming" the system without meaningfully enhancing a product's nutritional quality. Singapore has done this successfully with the Healthier Choice Symbol, demonstrating the value of regularly updating labelling frameworks to maintain their relevance and effectiveness.

Singapore has done well to receive the World Health Organization Healthy Cities Recognition Award in 2024 for the Nutri-Grade initiative, underscoring its international standing in innovating public health policies.

We can further raise the bar by focusing not only on healthier product choices, but also on cultivating a more health-literate population.

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