



Israel's healthy food revolution

Shaping the food choices of the nation

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Israel's healthy food revolution – shaping the food choices of the nation

Israel's Ministry of Health, as in many other developed countries, has decided to promote a healthier and more active lifestyle at a national level. Consequently, food companies in Israel will soon be required to put red warning labels on products containing high levels of sugar, salt or fat. In this white paper, Ella Freeman discusses Israel's efforts to shape the food choices of its population.

Approximately 60% of adults and 30% of teenagers in Israel are considered overweight¹, making Israel one of the highest ranking countries worldwide in respect of rising levels of obesity. It is commonly known that excess weight increases a person's risk of many health problems, including diabetes, heart disease and cancer. The Israeli government together with its affiliated Ministries is determined to combat the obesity epidemic which endangers the health and wellbeing of its citizens and subsequently in 2011 a national programme for an active and healthy life called 'Efshari-Bari', which in Hebrew means 'Health is Possible', was announced.

Headed by the Ministry of Health, together with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture and Sport, this nationwide health promotion programme focusses on encouraging Israelis to change their lifestyles – to eat right and exercise regularly. In order to achieve this, the Israeli government set up an action plan involving a variety of legislative

and regulatory changes. These changes included planned activities in local authorities and the workplace, as well as a vision to educate the public on the necessary steps to take in the pursuit of a healthier lifestyle.

Israel's government recognises that the food we consume plays a major role in our health and wellbeing. They also appreciate that positive change is required in order to improve the overall nutrition trends of the population in order to reap the many health benefits. The Israeli government believes that it is responsible for shaping the environment in which food choices are made and therefore needs to focus on shaping this area to make healthy food the obvious choice for its citizens.

Various ways to achieve this are being discussed, including legislative changes to food laws. These include reducing the amount of salt, sugar and trans fatty acids in food, limiting the advertising of unhealthy foods and supervising food quality in all educational establishments. Consequently in 2014, Israel's

¹ Ministry of Health Israel (2016) Report of the Committee for Promotion of Healthy Nutrition. Accessed: http://www.health.gov.il/publicationsfiles/healthydietcommittee_recommendation.pdf

parliament, the Knesset, passed a law which gave exclusive rights to the health and education authorities to set mandatory requirements for the composition and nutritional value of food that can be supplied or sold to children in schools. The law was aimed at ensuring that foods supplied in canteens and vending machines are healthy and nutritious.

The so called 'Efshari-Bari' campaign also led to the development of voluntary 'Healthful Bread' symbols; as part of the overall efforts to promote better nutrition and health. In 2012 the Ministry of Health asked all bread manufacturers and marketers to label their products with a mark to signify more nutritious and healthful bread i.e. baked goods with more unrefined flour, fewer calories and less salt. In accordance with the provisions, the product has to be at least 80% wholegrain, contain a maximum of 250 calories and less than 400 milligrams of sodium per 100 grams. All packaged and unpackaged baked goods, including bread, rolls and pitas, that meet the criteria of healthful breads can carry the 'Efshari-Bari' icon on pack or on the shelf to show that it conforms to the recommendations of the Ministry of Health for better nutrition. Additionally, the 'Efshari-Bari' symbols can also be displayed in bakeries, supermarkets and cafes that use healthy bread.

Front of pack labelling was another strategy proposed by the government. In 2012, the Ministry of Health announced a draft amendment to the 'Public Health Regulations (Food) (Nutrition Labelling)', aimed at expanding Israel's current mandatory nutritional labelling requirements to the front of pack. The draft focussed on four major

nutritional ingredients that would be marked in a prominent position on the front of the food package: energy, sugar, fat and sodium, in 100 grams or millilitres of the product. These ingredients should be marked in the aforementioned order and inside a specific symbol as shown in the third Annex of the draft amendment; in alcoholic drinks only the energy content was required. The lettering used in the symbol must not be smaller than a third of that used for the customary name of the product and the symbol must not occupy less than 20 percent of the area on the front of the pack. The plan was to introduce this initially on a voluntary basis and then to gradually roll out across the whole food industry for mandatory compliance. It was hoped that once it became law, the food industry would be encouraged to reformulate and improve products whilst providing consumers with a simple, clear and easily accessible labelling system that emphasises key ingredients. As with any change, it has been met by some resistance. There has been a lot of backlash from the food industry on this proposal with claims that it causes an unnecessary, costly burden which will ultimately be passed on to consumers. Consequently there has been no real progress on the draft since its publication in 2012 and there continues to be doubts as to whether it will ever become legally binding.

In order to re-ignite discussion and propose regulatory changes that would encourage a healthy nutritional environment for the Israeli population, the Ministry of Health set up 'The Regulatory Committee for Promotion of Healthy Nutrition'. The Committee, which is made up of various experts from the food industry and headed by the Ministry's Director

General Mr Moshe Bar Siman Tov, examined various ways in which the nutritional habits of the population can be influenced and how these could bring about reformulation of products. In November 2016, after months of discussion, the Committee published its recommendations for the regulatory changes which it deems necessary. The hallmark of these changes was a plan to gradually introduce red labels on pre-packed food products that exceed maximum levels of sodium, sugar or saturated fats, and green labels on products which are considered healthy. Furthermore, the Committee's recommendations called for the number of calories to be emphasised on packages, and for sugar content to be represented by the number of teaspoons in the product. Other than labelling, the Committee's recommendations included restrictions on the marketing and advertising of unhealthy food

(especially to children), reformulation of food that aims to reduce sodium, sugar and saturated fat content and providing support to small and medium food manufacturers who produce healthy food. In its recommendations the Committee also examined the possibility of imposing tax on foods perceived to be unhealthy, following a current trend in many western countries including the United Kingdom with its so called 'sugar tax'. The committee did not rule out imposing such measures in the future, however in light of the high food prices in Israel it intended to start by exploring other options and focusing on labelling and reformulation of products.

In April 2017 a draft regulation implementing the Committee's recommendations was published. This draft, entitled 'Protection of Public Health Regulations (Food) (Nutritional Labelling)', is a revision of the current nutritional labelling legislation in Israel. The

Fig. 1 Table showing proposed threshold values for red labels

| Per 100 grams of product | Stage 1* January 2018 | Stage 2 July 2019 | Stage 3 December 2020 |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|
| Solid Food | | | |
| Sodium (milligrams) | 800 | 500 | 400 |
| Total sugar (grams) | 22.5 | 15 | 10 |
| Total saturated fat (grams) | 6 | 5 | 4 |
| Liquid Food | | | |
| Sodium (milligrams) | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Total sugar (grams) | 6 | 5 | 5 |
| Total saturated fat (grams) | 3 | 3 | 3 |

draft regulation expands on the current provisions for nutritional labelling on the back of pack to include sugars and establishes provisions on the use of the front of pack red symbols in accordance with the proposed threshold values (see Fig. 1). Establishing nutritional profiling for using the green symbol is indicated in the draft, but this is subject to deliberation by a new professional committee, to be established in the near future. It is hoped that these labelling requirements will be the biggest incentive for food manufacturers to reformulate their products.

traditional products as part of a healthy lifestyle.

In conclusion, it remains to be seen whether this draft regulation makes its way into the Knesset for a parliamentary vote and is ultimately passed as legislation, unlike the 2012 draft amendment which has seen no substantial progress since its publication. Despite no real legislation currently being enforced, Israel's healthy food revolution has already made waves across the industry, indicating positive progress towards reformulation and healthy food. For example, little bags of chocolate milk, locally known as 'Shoko', which have traditionally been distributed to children as snacks, rewards, and as part of meals in school lunches, were flagged as unhealthy, due to their high sugar content during a recent campaign to increase awareness of the health issues related to junk food. Consequently local manufacturers, such as 'Yotvata' and 'Tara', took the initiative to reformulate their products and now offer versions of the popular chocolate milk with no added sugar. This means that with careful reformulation, this Israeli tradition need not be consigned to the bin of history and that many more generations of Israelis can enjoy

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In an ever changing and fast paced industry, Leatherhead's global Regulatory team, comprising over 30 advisors, constantly scans the legislative landscape within all major international markets and reports on emerging issues and proposals to its members via a weekly global legal highlights e-mail. Throughout this period of change to Israel's labelling legislation, Leatherhead's team of experts will be on-hand to deliver new information as and when it becomes available.

Our team covers all major international markets and is able to help with all questions relating to proposals and their long term impact. We can also provide training on food supplement legislation and give advice on additives, flavourings and ingredients, as well as label and formulation checks.

About the author

Ella Freeman is a Regulatory Consultant at Leatherhead Food Research, possessing native Hebrew and Russian language skills with extensive knowledge on food legislation in Israel, Russia, Bulgaria and the EU. Ella joined Leatherhead Food Research in 2008 after completing a Bachelor's degree in Pharmacology at University College London and a Master's degree in biomedical research at Imperial College London.

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