

THE CHOICES PROGRAMME

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A global multi-stakeholder platform to make the healthy choice the easy choice

Background

A worldwide growth in overweight and obesity has led to an increase of cardiovascular diseases, type II diabetes, certain types of cancer, dental diseases and osteoporosis. The World Health Organization (WHO) has acknowledged the magnitude of this problem in the WHO Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health (2004) which resulted in specific recommendations for the food industry:

- Limit levels of **saturated fat, trans fat, added sugars, and salt** in existing products
- Provide consumers with adequate and easily understood product and nutrition information
- Issue simple, clear and consistent food labels and evidence-based health claims
- Help consumers to make informed and healthy food choices

What is Choices Programme

Simple for consumers, backed by science

The Choices Programme was introduced in 2006 in response to this WHO call to the food industry to help tackle the growing problem of obesity and diet-related diseases around the world. The Choices Programme is a multi-stakeholder initiative which helps consumers to easily select healthy food and beverage options. The programme relies on a front-of-pack logo that can be found on food products which have been successfully evaluated against a set of product criteria that use international dietary guidelines as their basis. These criteria are periodically reviewed by members of an independent International Scientific Committee, with backgrounds in nutrition, food technology and consumer science. The criteria are further adapted to regional food habits and food cultures by the Regional Scientific Committees for Europe and Latin America.

Organisation

The Choices International Foundation serves as an umbrella body of the national Choices programmes and represents the programme at an international level. It has four objectives:

1. to engage with international stakeholders such as WHO, the European Commission, other logo organisations
2. to facilitate the introduction of nutrient profiling based tools for healthier consumer choices and product reformulation in more countries
3. to support the International Scientific Committees. The Choices International Foundation is also the first point

Choices International Foundation

Rue Belliard 199, bte 22

B-1040 Brussels

Belgium

+32 2 502 13 51

www.choicesprogramme.org

info@choicesprogramme.org

of reference for information and research relating to positive front-of-pack nutrition logos, impact analysis, claims and nutritional criteria.

4. to maintain the integrity of the programme. Participation in the programme however is regulated by the national foundations.

Currently, the programme is present in The Netherlands, Belgium, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia and has established cooperation with other European, Latin American and Asian countries. The Choices logo can be found on approximately 7000 food and beverages products of more than 130 companies. Choices Programme is an initiative growing every day and its visibility around the world continues to increase.



Impact

In parallel to the programme's development, independent scientific research into the effects of the Choices logo is being carried out. Consumers gave a high degree of recognition and credibility to the Choices logo, which they say is easy to interpret. Especially consumers who pay attention to healthier diets buy more products with the Choices logo. In relation to innovation and reformulation, research demonstrates that the salt, saturated fat and sugar content of Choices-compliant products has been reduced over time, while fibre content has increased. Modeling studies have shown that a Choices-compliant diet will result in a strong decrease of saturated and trans fat, sugar and salt, and an increase in fiber intake^{1,2}. If consumers consistently select products carrying the Choices-logo, their diet would be more in line with the WHO dietary recommendations.

Worldwide support

On 16 April 2013, the Dutch version of the Choices Logo ('Vinkje') has received EU and national approval. The logo is now the single food choice logo for The Netherlands. The authorization is the first of its kind in the European Union. The World Health Organization has identified Choices as one of the few validated nutrient profiling systems. This has led to the establishment of Choices as a platform for information and expertise sharing between positive front-of-pack logo systems, scientists, companies and public authorities. Currently, the Choices Foundation supports different countries in the implementation of positive logo systems.

How you can make a difference

The Choices Programme offers the possibility for concrete and visible action that is compatible with any health policy agenda. Its positive and indiscriminative approach is also attractive to many stakeholders. The programme is highly credible, it is voluntary and self-regulating. Overall, the Choices logo globally supports governments, scientists and food companies to improve the healthiness of consumers' lifestyles.

1 AJC Roodenburg et al. (2011). PLoS ONE 6 (2)

2 EW de Menezes et al. (2013). Food Chemistry (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.foodchem.2013.02.031>).