

Sugar cereals are 'Smart Choices'? FDA not so sure

October 21 2009, By MATTHEW PERRONE , AP Business Writer



FILE - In this 2008 file image provided by the Keystone Center, a sample of a label that appears on foods that meet certain nutritional requirements within their categories is shown. U.S. manufacturers, including Kraft Foods and General Mills, rolled out their so-called Smart Choices program last year, amid growing concern about obesity rates. The green labels appear on the front of boxed foods that meet certain standards for calories per serving and number of servings.(AP Photo/ Keystone Center)

(AP) -- Ever wondered how that "Smart Choices" sticker wound up on the front of Froot Loops or Cocoa Puffs?

Well, [federal health officials](#) are having similar thoughts, and they're warning food manufacturers.

The [Food and Drug Administration](#) said Tuesday that nutritional logos

from food manufacturers may be misleading consumers about the actual health benefits of cereal, crackers and other processed foods. The agency sent a letter to companies saying it will begin cracking down on inaccurate food labeling. The FDA did not name specific products or give a timeline for enforcement.

U.S. manufacturers, including Kellogg, Kraft Foods and General Mills, rolled out their so-called Smart Choices program last year, amid growing concern about [obesity](#) rates. The green labels appear on the front of foods that meet certain standards for calories per serving and fat content.

But consumer advocates complain about lax standards for the program, with logos appearing on everything from frozen sweets to sugary cereals.

"There are products that have gotten the Smart Choices check mark that are almost 50 percent sugar," FDA Commissioner Margaret Hamburg said during a call with reporters.

The agency is developing proposed nutritional standards that would have to be met before manufacturers place such claims on their packages, Hamburg said. She added that she hoped industry would cooperate with the FDA to develop standardized "labeling that all Americans can trust and use to build better diets."

Mike Hughes, chair of the Smart Choices Program, said in a statement that Smart Choices is based on the U.S. Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

"We believe in the science behind the Smart Choices Program," he said. "We also look forward to the opportunity to participate in FDA's initiatives on front-of-package labeling."

There are more than a half-dozen labels crowding grocery packages,

including the American Heart Association's heart-shaped logo, Giant Food Store's Healthy Ideas box and Supervalu's Nutritional IQ logo.

"There's a growing proliferation of forms and symbols, check marks, numerical ratings, stars, heart icons and the like," said Hamburg.

"There's truly a cacophony of approaches, not unlike the tower of Babel."

The FDA plans to research whether one particular approach would make it easier for consumers to select healthy foods. Hamburg pointed to the success of the U.K.'s traffic light system, which uses red, yellow and green lights to highlight nutritional quality.

The Grocery Manufacturers Association said its members will work with the FDA to provide useful nutritional information to consumers. The Washington-based group - which includes Kraft, Nestle USA and most other large [food](#) processors - said companies already have reformulated 10,000 products to make them healthier.

Such changes includes ConAgra's move to reduce sodium in its soup, hot dogs and other products by 20 percent, and General Mills adding fiber to its cereals.

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Citation: Sugar cereals are 'Smart Choices'? FDA not so sure (2009, October 21) retrieved 16 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-10-sugar-cereals-smart-choices-fda.html>

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