



## Health Canada's Unambitious First Step to Update Food Labels Systematically Understates Levels of Salt, Sugar

**December 14, 2016 (OTTAWA):** Bill Jeffery, LLB, Executive Director of the Centre for Health Science and Law (CHSL), made the following statement about the new nutrition labelling regulations which were [officially published \(at pages 4,351-4,479\)](#) today:

*"Today's tweaks to Nutrition Facts and ingredient labelling rules won't reduce much of the [50,000 Canadian deaths](#) caused per year by the nutrition-related portion of heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and cancer. That is a disappointment for 135 pages of regulatory text and an estimated half-billion-dollar implementation cost for consumers. The new regulations were proposed in nearly identical form by the former Conservative government. Health Canada can redeem itself by making adjustments to the sodium and sugar levels in the new ["Table of Daily Values"](#), and though two other label consultations continuing in 2017-2018 (re front-of-pack interpretive nutrition labelling and ingredient labelling). Today's regulations:*

- 1. **will continue to grossly understate how salty the food supply is** by stipulating daily targets for sodium that are [more than 50% higher than the levels Health Canada, itself, recommends most Canadians should "aim for."](#) (Labels must base sodium levels on a 2,300 mg/day target instead of the 1,200-1,500 mg per day that Health Canada promotes to teenagers and adults. The former Health Minister's own [Sodium Working Group](#) unanimously recommended 1,500 mg to be used as the basis for Nutrition Facts.) So, for instance, virtually no potato chips on the market would count as high in sodium—more than 345 mg of sodium per serving—under these rules and labels of all other foods will represent the contents as nearly half as salty as they really are in relation to dietary guidance.;*
- 2. **will begin to grossly understate how sugary the food supply is** by stipulating a daily target for sugar that is 100% to 300% higher than the [World Health Organization's target for "free sugars"](#) (added sugars and sugars in fruit juice) which were also adopted by the [United Kingdom Department of Health](#) and UK [Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition](#). (Health Canada requires a 100 g daily target for sugar—approx. 25 teaspoons—instead of 25 g or 50 g, 6-12 teaspoons.) A typical can of pop contains more than 150% of the WHO's daily target for free sugars, but only 35% of Health Canada's DV for total sugars. And possibly only three of the hundreds of breakfast cereals on the market now would count as high in sugar (more than 15 grams per serving): Post Sugar-Crisp and two regional brand products.;*
- 3. **do not require quantitative information on multi-ingredient products purporting to contain key health-related ingredients**—such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grains—the under-consumption of which causes more than 30,000 deaths annually.;* and

**4. do not require warnings (as the European Union does) for artificial dyes that Health Canada acknowledges cause behavioural problems in sensitive children.** The new regulations require only that ingredient lists disclose specific names on labels, not just the generic term “colour.”

*The Minister’s consultation on front-of-pack nutrition labelling will continue until 2018 and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) is consulting on possible ingredient labelling changes during the same time period. Canadians will be better-served if the final package of label reforms includes an easy-to-interpret overall nutrient score on the fronts of packages that takes account of all nutrients and ingredients of public health importance, instead of putting the onus back on consumers to do so many calculations and so much reading between the lines. Because the “Daily Values” for sugar and sodium are no longer part of the hard-to-modify regulations (they are incorporated by reference from the “[Table of Daily Values](#)”), they could be updated by an expedited policy reform process before the front-of-pack and CFIA ingredient labelling rules are finalized. Presumably, most companies will prefer to change their labels only once after all three sets of regulations are settled.<sup>1</sup>*

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**For more information, contact:** Bill Jeffery at the Centre for Health Science and Law at [BillJeffery@HealthScienceAndLaw.ca](mailto:BillJeffery@HealthScienceAndLaw.ca) or 613-244-7337 (ext. 1) or 613-565-2140 (mobile).

**Background on CHSL:** The Centre for Health Science and Law is a non-profit health advocacy organization and publisher of *Food for Life Report*, the first issue (Jan/Feb 2017) is in press today.

The Centre accepts no funding from industry or government and *Food for Life Report* carries no advertising. Bill Jeffery led a public campaign from 1996 to 2002 for mandatory nutrition labelling for the now-defunct Canadian operations of U.S.-based Center for Science in the Public Interest. Since the late 1990s, he has participated in annual negotiations of the U.N. Codex Committee on Food Labelling on behalf of the International Association of Consumer Food Organizations.

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<sup>1</sup> Improvements to formatting specifications for ingredient lists on the backs of labels will help end the nuisance of companies using hard-to-read type-faces and poor colour contrasts. And new rules to help standardize serving sizes will help people who conscientiously compare products in categories where companies base nutrition information on widely varying serving sizes. That said, these changes to the fine print on the backs of labels are likely to be low-yield improvement from a public health perspective.