



# THE HEART FOUNDATION OF JAMAICA

Founded in 1971 by the Lions Club of Kingston

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## THE NEWS EDITOR

### Local, Regional Researchers Provide Evidence About Jamaicans' Preference for Front of Package Warning Labels

Jamaicans are one step closer to having food labels that will help them identify foods high in unhealthy nutrients. Recent research from the leading health agency in the Americas, the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO), provides empirical evidence about the most effective type of labelling to help local shoppers easily identify processed foods high in unhealthy nutrients such as sugars, salts and fats.

As the Heart Foundation of Jamaica (HFJ) continues its call for mandatory Front-of-Package (FOP) labelling, which is a part of the healthy nutrition policy campaign mounted by the organisation and its Coalition partners, it is pushing for important information about unhealthy foods to be placed on the front of food packages and be easy to read in Jamaica.

The HFJ is very pleased with the progress made at last month's meeting of the Bureau of Standards of Jamaica (BSJ) Labelling Committee, which was a part of ongoing stakeholder deliberations to move towards a labelling standard. This standard is being discussed locally at the BSJ, and regionally through the CARICOM Regional Organization for Standards and Quality (CROSQ). CROSQ has proposed the adoption of the black octagonal (eight sided, stop sign shaped) featuring the expression "High In..." warnings as the sub-regional standard for labelling of pre-packaged foods.

In response to calls for local evidence on the most effective type of labelling for Jamaica and the Caribbean, HFJ as a member of that BSJ committee has shared the findings of a recent study which shows that the black octagonal warnings were the easiest to understand and use for Jamaican consumers. The study was designed and conducted by the Ministry of Health and Wellness (MOHW), the University of Technology (UTECH) and PAHO. PAHO has described the study as research which "contributes to the body of robust scientific evidence accumulated in other countries of the Americas."

"This study showed clearly that the octagonal labels work best at helping people identify and choose healthier foods," said Dr. Anselm Hennis, Director of the Department of Non-communicable diseases and Mental Health at PAHO.

"This study validates the CARICOM Regional Organisation for Standards & Quality proposal to use the octagonal warnings on food and drink products throughout the Caribbean," Dr. Hennis said.

At present there are no standardized requirements for nutritional labelling in the region. As a result, the Jamaican consumer faces various products on supermarket shelves with a number of variations in nutritional labelling, including unverifiable nutritional claims, nutritional information in foreign languages or no nutritional information. Without the correct, easily understood information consumers do not have the tools needed to make informed choices about the food they purchase for themselves and their families.

Alarming, one in two Jamaicans (54%) are overweight or obese. Overweight and obesity are major risk factors for a number of chronic non-communicable diseases (NCDs), including diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and cancer. Jamaicans, like many people in the rest of the world, now have diets dominated by imported processed and ultra-processed pre-packaged foods, many of which have high levels of added sugars, sodium, saturated fats, and refined carbohydrates. The World Health Organisation has recommended reduction in consumption of these foods to tackle the growing obesity epidemic. Nutrition labels are an important population based approach to provide supportive environments to help consumers make better nutritional choices.

The MOHW/UTECH/PAHO study, which compared four types of Front-of-Package labelling, was conducted among 1206 adult Jamaican supermarket shoppers across nine parishes between December 2020 and February 2021. Participants shown products with the black octagonal labels were most likely (compared to those shown three other types of labels) to correctly choose least harmful food products, correctly identify least harmful food products and correctly identify food products with excess sugars, saturated fats or sodium. A fact sheet with details on the study can be found at the link below: <https://iris.paho.org/handle/10665.2/53328>

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