

The heart symbol helps to choose healthier food



TYPE STATUS	Fully implemented Ongoing	LAST UPDATE	September 2021	FINLAND • NATIONAL Primary and secondary prevention
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PROBLEM & OBJECTIVE

PROBLEM The criteria is focused on main nutrition challenges in Finland: Finns consume too much saturated fat, energy and salt, and too little unsaturated fat and fiber. Approximately 55% of all Finns have a total cholesterol level above the recommended 5 mmol/l and approximately 50 % of Finns have high blood pressure.

OBJECTIVE The Heart Symbol helps consumer to choose healthier food products in supermarkets and restaurants. The primary goal of the Heart Symbol is to promote public health and the front pack labeling is based on the Finnish nutrition recommendations.

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KEY COMPONENTS / STEPS

- 1997: The need for nutrition labels to help consumers to make healthier food choices was emphasized in the statements for promoting Finnish heart health and prevent type 2 diabetes.
- 2000: The system including a front-of-pack logo on products, a Heart Symbol, for Finnish consumers was developed and launched jointly by Finnish Heart Association (FHA) and Finnish Diabetes Association (FDA).
- 2007: Heart Symbol for meals (food eaten outside the home) was launched in 2007.
- 2008: Heart Symbol is acknowledged by authorities. Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry has reported Heart Symbol to be the only symbol on the Finnish market to be regarded as a nutritional claim (EC No 1924/2006).
- 2014: In the Finnish nutrition recommendations Heart Symbol was included in guidelines for consumers. Both National Nutrition Council and Ministry of Social Affairs and Health notified Heart Symbol in guidelines for institutional catering services.
- 2017: There is great potential to reduce the intake of saturated fat and salt by using products bearing the Heart Symbol. Using products with complying criteria helps meeting nutrition recommendations (Raulio S. et al.2017).
- 2021: About 2000 products on the Finnish market have the right to use the symbol and healthier meals is served over 2200 restaurants. Heart Symbol is very well known (87 % of respondents**) and appreciated*** in Finland.

KEY CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

- The criteria are regularly updated if needed by the Heart Symbol expert group which includes professionals in nutrition and medicine appointed by the organisations in charge, FHA and FDA.
- When updating criteria products on the market and technological limitations are also taken into account.
- There are criteria for total fat and saturated fat (=saturated + transfatty acids), salt, sugar and fibre.
- In all, the criteria are defined for ten main food groups that may further be divided into subgroups. The main food group include: milk and dairy products, oils and fats, fish, meat, meat products, bread and cereal products, convenience foods, Side dishes (rice, potatoes etc.), spices and seasoning sauces, vegetables, fruits and berries.
- To be able to carry the Heart Symbol, food companies need to apply for the right to use the symbol.
- Heart Symbol marked on food package or restaurant buffet shows consumer better choices in its product group.

MAIN IMPACTS / ADDED VALUE

- The Heart Symbol is only symbol in Finland giving information about nutritional quality in food products. It tells the consumer at a glance that the product marked with this symbol is a better choice in its product group.
- The criteria gives guidelines to food reformulation.
- In Finland, more than 2 million meals are daily eaten outside home. Thus the nutritional quality of those meals is of great importance to public health. Heart symbol provides the criteria and also tools to make healthy food visible. It also increases the knowhow of food service employees about nutritional quality of the food they prepare.
- In September 2021, all major food companies (83 food industry companies and retailers and 54 high volume vegetable producers) use Heart Symbol in their products. Front-of-pack logo is on 2000 products. The Heart Symbol is used in 2200 restaurants.
- Heart Symbol is very well known and appreciated. Heart Symbol has very high awareness (90% Finnish adults).67 % of Finnish adults says they use Heart Symbol products. In 2020 The Heart Symbol was 14th valued brand in Finland. Based on annual surveys, Heart Symbol has very high customer satisfaction. Customers (food companies etc.) are loyal and have high willingness to recommend Heart Symbol to potential customers.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Cooperation with different food chain operators is essential, e.g. food industry and food service sector. Attitude to Heart Symbol has been positive from the beginning. Nevertheless use of logo grew slowly at first. Eg. in the first year (2000) amount of products with Heart Symbol was 38, ten years later 740 and today (2021) almost 2000. There is still a lot of potential in the market: hundreds of products meet the criteria but food companies have not yet applied to get right to use Heart Symbol. Marketing and lobbying has been done years before launches and work is ongoing. Also authorities in ministries and National Nutrition Council are important partners.

REFERENCES & DOCUMENTATION

- Raulio S et al. Nutrition Health Food Sci 2017; 5(1):1-7
- Research by Frankly Partners, a consumer insight agency. 11/2017
- Research by: M&M and Taloustutkimus. Brand value research 2019

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