

# Using Traffic Light Labels to Promote Healthier Food Purchases Among Patrons in Recreational Facilities

## Research Summary

This is a summary of the 2015 research article “Using traffic light labels to improve food selection in recreation and sport facility eating environments” by Dana Lee Olstad, Julianne Vermeer, Linda McCargar, Rachel Prowse, and Kim Raine

### STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

- **Traffic light labelling (TLL)** on a concession menu increased sales of healthy foods and decreased sales of unhealthy foods. TLL did not affect the concession’s total food sales (revenue).
- Menu labelling is a promising population health intervention to improve diet.
- Policies that require restaurants to post nutrition information on menus should include concessions and restaurants in public recreational facilities.

### BACKGROUND

- Many recreational facilities sell unhealthy food, which can make it more difficult for patrons to select healthy items.
- Food service managers are often hesitant to sell healthier items because they believe customers will not buy them.
- Menu labelling is a strategy that can help people choose healthier foods when eating outside of the home. **TLL** is a simple type of menu labelling. Similar to a traffic light, menu items are divided into 3 groups: **Green** means ‘most healthy’, **yellow** ‘somewhat healthy’ and **red** ‘least healthy’.

### STUDY PURPOSE

In a recreational facility concession, researchers studied how TLL impacts:

1. What foods and beverages customers buy
2. Overall concession sales



#### Example of red, yellow and green-light labelled foods

**RED:** Deep fried French fries, nachos, regular chips, candy, chocolate, pastries, ice cream, sugary drinks

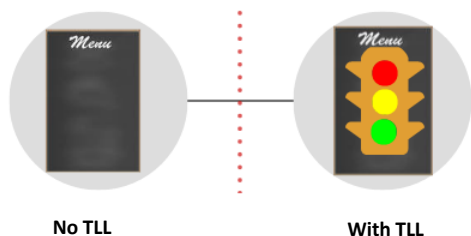
**YELLOW:** Beef and vegetable rice bowl, vegetables with added salt, baked chips, cereal bars, chocolate milk, flavoured fortified soy beverage

**GREEN:** Baked sweet potato wedges, roast chicken sandwich on whole grain bread, fresh fruits and vegetables, low-fat and low-sugar yogurt, white milk, plain fortified soy beverage, water

### STUDY METHODS

- This study took place in 2014 in Edmonton, Alberta. One publicly funded, multi-sport recreational facility participated in the study. Traffic light symbols were placed next to foods and beverages on menu boards and food display shelves for 1 week in the concession.
- Food items were labelled with a **green** ‘choose most’, **yellow** ‘choose sometimes’, or **red** ‘choose least often’ coloured dot. These categories were based on the Alberta Nutrition Guidelines for Children and Youth. Signs and fact sheets explaining the TLL were available for customers.
- Researchers compared food and beverage sales with and without TLL.

### Sales of Concession Items With and Without Traffic Light Labelling



Sales of green, yellow, and red light foods were recorded with and without TLL

#### With TLL

Sales of green light “healthy” foods increased



#### With TLL

Sales of red light “least healthy” foods decreased



### Do customers buy healthier food when it is clearly labelled? **YES!**

- **In this study, patrons made healthier choices when TLL was in place.** The sales of green light ‘healthy’ foods increased, while sales of red light ‘least healthy’ foods decreased.
- **TLL did not affect concession revenue.** The total amount of money received from concession sales and the total number of food items sold did not change after TLL was introduced.

### Average Daily Concession Revenue Without and With Traffic Light Labelling



\* Change was not statistically significant



### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- In one multi-sport recreational facility concession, TLL resulted in more healthy and fewer less healthy food purchases. These changes **did not** significantly decrease the concession’s revenue.
- TLL may be an effective way to increase customer demand for healthier items. With greater demand, managers may be more likely to offer healthier foods and beverages in their concessions.
- Policymakers should consider mandating menu labelling in recreational facilities as a part of broader menu labelling regulations.

### REFERENCE

Olstad, D. L., Vermeer, J., McCargar, L. J., Prowse, R. J., & Raine, K. D. (2015). Using traffic light labels to improve food selection in recreation and sport facility eating environments. *Appetite*, 91, 329-335.

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