

# Nutrition grading for sauces, oils, seasonings may shape palates

Hope is that more will prefer less sodium, saturated fats as products are reformulated



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When packaged sauces, seasonings, instant noodles and cooking oils go under a nutritional grading programme in mid-2027, consumers can expect manufacturers to tweak the recipes for some of their products to qualify for healthier grades.

The hope is that the Nutri-Grade labelling scheme will shape people's palates for them to prefer less sodium and saturated fats, when manufacturers reformulate their products to contain less of these nutrients.

After all, the scheme, which now applies to beverages, has been successful in tempering Singaporeans' taste for sweet drinks.

Many people now opt for packaged drinks carrying an A or B on their front packaging for containing less sugar.

Local food manufacturers will need to invest in research and development, adjust production processes, and source alternative ingredients.

Under the Nutri-Grade labelling scheme, these products will be graded A to D – with D having the highest amounts of sodium, sugar and/or saturated fat, or so-called nutrients of concern. Products labelled C and D must carry a front-of-pack label. In addition, those labelled D cannot be advertised.

The expanded scheme will apply to 23 sub-categories of pre-packed salt, sauces, seasonings, instant noodles, and cooking oils, with each of the categories having its own grading thresholds.

A check with the Health Promotion Board (HPB) showed that currently and collectively, some 42 per cent of these products have sodium, sugar and/or saturated fat thresholds

equivalent to Nutri-Grade D, and another 26 per cent have thresholds equivalent to Grade C.

Health Minister Ong Ye Kung, who announced the extension of the scheme at an April 6 Singapore Heart Foundation event, said the practical thing for manufacturers to do would be to reformulate their products progressively.

“That means, if the product is Grade D, the manufacturer can make practical, small adjustments to reformulate to Grade C, before taking larger steps to achieve Grades A or B,” he said.

Dr Kalpana Bhaskaran, president of the Singapore Nutrition and Dietetics Association and the head of the Glycemic Index Research Unit at Temasek Polytechnic, said brands may reformulate to avoid negative consumer perceptions. This could eventually drive consumer preferences and tastes.

“Manufacturers should consider this as an opportunity for innovation – companies may start investing in healthier alternatives or clearer messaging to maintain consumer trust and be a catalyst to rethink how they support consumers' overall health and well-being,” she said.

When contacted, local food manufacturers said they supported the move to improve people's health, but that reformulation will take time and effort, and multiple challenges exist.

## BALANCING TASTE WITH HEALTH

Ms Cyndy Au, deputy chairwoman of the Food and Beverage Industry Group at the Singapore Manufacturing Federation, said that manufacturers of sauces, seasonings and instant noodles are likely to launch healthier product lines while keeping their best-selling products unchanged.

The federation's food and beverage group members include the key manufacturers of packaged seasonings and sauces, and instant noodles here, including Kwong Cheong Thye, Seah's Spices, Sin Hwa Dee, Kikkoman, and Nestle.

Reducing sodium without compromising on taste is not



The Nutri-Grade nutritional grading scheme, which now applies to beverages, will apply to 23 sub-categories of pre-packed salt, sauces, seasonings, instant noodles, and cooking oils from mid-2027. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

straightforward, and manufacturers will not be able to tell if customers will take to the reformulated product, said Ms Au.

Tat Hui Foods, currently the only supplier of multigrain instant noodles with the voluntary Healthier Choice symbol here, said it is challenging to develop healthier instant noodles that are appealing to customers with less fat and salt, and no artificial additives or enhancers.

It has more than 20 instant noodle products that would qualify for either an A or B Nutri-Grade label, said Tat Hui Foods marketing director Shiang Lim.

“Sales started off very slowly for healthier instant noodles, but we are glad that they are now picking up as consumers become more health-conscious.”

While nutritional labelling systems such as Nutri-Grade are important for public health, a product with a less favourable grade may be a higher-quality product because of the traditional brewing method and taste, noted Mr Thomas Pek, the managing director of sauce maker Tai Hua Food Industries.

Tai Hua's superior soya sauce product, for instance, may not receive a favourable Nutri-Grade rating because of its sodium

content, but the salt is essential for the traditional brewing process and flavour development, he said.

Reformulating its soya sauce products would also affect not just the taste but also the manufacturing process and cost of packaging, he added.

Dr Kalpana said that mayonnaise or creamy dressings, and certain sauces like satay, curry, and some dipping sauces can contain significant amounts of saturated fat and are high in sodium, as well as sugar.

“The primary challenge when reducing fat, sugar, or salt in sauces is maintaining a balance of flavours. Without these key ingredients, the sauce may taste less rich, less satisfying, or more one-dimensional.”

Manufacturers can get help through the HPB's Healthier Ingredient Development Scheme, a grant to support the development of healthier products, when reformulating their products.

However, reformulating products to achieve better health grades involves more than just swapping ingredients, said Ms Au.

It often requires substituting the salt with a combination of potassium chloride, yeast extracts, MSG, herbs and spices

with natural flavour, she said.

Manufacturers may also have to retrofit or enhance a manufacturing line to produce the reformulated products, thus driving up their cost, she said.

For products like instant noodles, they may have to reformulate not just the seasoning, but also the noodles.

They may need to invest in new research and development, rework production processes, source alternative ingredients, redesign packaging and conduct consumer testing to see if people like the new product, said Ms Au.

“These efforts come with time and cost implications and depending on the scale of reformulation, consumers may see some price adjustments.”

## SIGNS OF EXCESSIVE SODIUM INTAKE

The authorities hope that people will make better choices once they know the nutritional content of what they buy and use. Rising demand will help to bring down the costs, HPB said.

Professor Tan Huay Cheem, chairman of the Singapore Heart Foundation, said that a person requires only about 500mg of sodium a day to function properly, though the World

Health Organisation allows up to a maximum of 2,000mg per day of sodium intake.

“But in Singapore, we know that Singaporeans consume more than 3,400mg of sodium a day,” he said.

Because people are primed to that level of salt intake, it would be hard for them to judge how much less salt is in a product from the taste alone, he said.

People also cannot rely on signs like thirst and water retention to see if they have had too much salt, as damage might have been done by then.

“By the time you have consumed too much, you probably have developed some kind of acute or chronic effect of sodium overdose,” said Prof Tan, a senior consultant at the National University Heart Centre, Singapore.

“Acutely, one can feel thirsty, bloated and experience swelling in the legs. Chronically, your blood pressure may be elevated, causing hypertension and other complications.”

Singaporeans also consume more than the daily limit of saturated fat, mostly from cooking oils.

Dr Kalpana said consumers can adjust to eating healthier with time. They can start by using less of their usual sauces and, over time, as their taste buds adjust, gradually shift to using the lower-sodium versions. These have 25 per cent less sodium than the regular versions.

“For a start, if you reduce your sodium intake by half, you'll find that there will be a significant reduction in blood pressure,” said Prof Tan.

He said this reduction in blood pressure can happen within a week, and there are studies that have shown that once you reduce the blood pressure, you become more salt-sensitive.

“You will find that by reducing salt and saturated fat... your entire sense of well-being is enhanced.

“Perhaps you may have improved energy. You certainly don't have that loaded feeling of water retention from excessive sodium intake.”

When manufacturers begin to offer new products because of the scheme, the overall outcome is that the average product could become healthier, with less sodium and less saturated fat – as it happened with soft drinks.

In 2024, Singapore was one of eight cities across Asia conferred the World Health Organisation Healthy Cities Recognition Awards, for its Nutri-Grade measures to transform food environments to improve public health.

In the near future, a simple label may be all it takes to get manufacturers and consumers to a better place – one where informed choices can be easily made, for the benefit of all.