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The Sarona Food Market in Tel Aviv.(Photo by: MARC ISRAEL SELLEM)

Health Ministry folds: Food product labeling to be postponed

By JUDY SIEGEL-ITZKOVICH
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The ministry has invested most of its efforts into the labeling reform, but has not taken measures to educate people of all ages about which food is healthy.

Bowing to pressure from the local food manufacturing industry and importers via their lobbyists, the Health Ministry on Wednesday decided to postpone implementation of reform it initiated last year to mark food packages with red or green circles that will indicate whether or not the food is healthful.

Instead of these designations being required in March 2018 as initially proposed, they will be mandatory on only some products from January 2020. Requirements will become a bit stricter a year later.

The ministry has invested most of its efforts into the labeling reform, but has not taken measures to educate people of all ages about which food is healthy nor promoted healthy lifestyles using campaigns geared at encouraging exercise and discouraging smoking.

The Knesset Labor, Social Welfare and Health Committee voted unanimously (15- 0) on Wednesday morning after the ministry changed its position and agreed to postpone the reform after encountering fierce opposition from food corporations and problems from the Justice Ministry and Minister Ayelet Shaked.

The Health Ministry said it agreed to the postponement in order to give the food industry and importers time to change the salt, sugar and fat composition of its products and to change the labels.

The question facing reformers is whether poor people, who suffer the most from obesity, hypertension and dental cavities, will pay attention to the icons and therefore choose food which has been indicated as healthy or whether they will continue to buy the less healthy, cheaper products that they are accustomed to.

The ministry also agreed to require the changes in two stages instead of all at once, but opposed the three stages demanded by industry. In the first phase, which will take effect in January 2020, a red emblem will be required to appear on solid food with more than 500 milligrams of sodium,

12 grams of sugar and 5 grams of saturated fat per 100 grams of the product, as well as on liquids with over 500 milligrams of sodium, 5 grams of sugar and 3 grams of saturated fat per 100 grams.

In the second phase, which is due to take effect in January 2021, red icons would have to appear on solid food with over 500 milligrams of sodium, 10 grams of sugar and 4 grams of saturated fat per 100 grams, as well as on liquids with over 400 milligrams of sodium, 5 grams of sugar and 3 grams of saturated fat per 100 grams.

The Health Ministry decided to exempt companies from the red icon requirement for packages that are less than 25 square centimeters because the front of the package is “too small.”

Diabetologist Prof. Itamar Raz, who has been active in the reform, said: “Children consume snacks in small packages, so they should be marked as well.” Dr. Vered Kaufman of Ariel University added: “Low-income families consume large packages with small packages in them, so they therefore must mark them.”

The Knesset committee had discussions regarding yellow cheese, which frequently appears in children’s sandwiches taken to school, as well as hard and semi-hard cheeses, with advocates saying that it has a lot of calcium and opponents saying it has too much saturated fat and salt.

The Health Ministry said yellow cheese would have to bear a red icon despite strong opposition from the dairy industry.

Health Ministry director-general Moshe Bar Siman Tov said: “We have had many discussions in the last few days and found no justification for excluding yellow cheese from this requirement. There is no independent factor that justifies the exclusion of the yellow cheese from the red icon requirement.

“The consumer should know that this product has a high amount of sodium and saturated fat and should make the informed choice. We do not want to hide this information from the public. The food companies have managed to reduce the sodium and saturated fat in the cottage cheese and other products, and I am sure they will be able to do it in the yellow cheese.”

Bar Siman Tov, the first economist in his post who is not a physician, said: “We don’t want customers to go to the stores and see everything with red symbols. It’s better that the Israeli taste buds get used gradually to new tastes. I don’t see industry as the enemy.”

He added: “This is a huge reform that has encountered quite a few objections and pressures from Israel and abroad. We have overcome a great obstacle.”

Dr. Hagai Levine, an epidemiologist and public health expert at the Hebrew University’s Braun School of Public Health and Community Medicine, said Israelis will be confused by the different stages. Instead, he said, stricter standards should be required in one step.

Levine, a leader of the Israel Public Health Physicians Association in the Israel Medical Association, said that the group is in favor of mandatory icons, but that this tool was the “weakest” effort to improve public health. There must be education and other proactive measures, he argued, as well as the lowering of prices of whole wheat bread and the raising of the cost of white bread. The Health Ministry, said Levine, was forced to make a problematic compromise as a result of lobbyists.

Committee chairman MK Eli Alalouf said: “Contrary to the claims, we have not fought here for any vested interest. The best interests of the citizen and his health are what we have in mind.”



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