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Research review

The impact of menu energy labelling across socioeconomic groups: A systematic review

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Menu energy labelling at point of purchase is gaining traction worldwide, yet the potential impact for different socioeconomic groups is unclear. We aimed to summarise evidence on the effectiveness of menu energy labelling by socioeconomic position (SEP).
Methods: A systematic search for papers published to September 2015 was conducted using terms for labelling, food outlets, and SEP. Quality of studies was assessed. Results were summarised across stages of an intervention logic pathway.
Results: Eighteen papers were identified. Of twelve studies reporting the effect of menu energy labelling in low SEP populations, six reported on purchase outcomes. All but one of these reported no positive effect of the policy for this population. Two of the five studies that compared purchase outcomes of menu labelling across SEP groups reported that the policy was effective overall. These two studies reported either a significant decline in fast food calories purchased from consumers in high (but not low) SEP neighbourhoods or a significantly greater decline in calories purchased among consumers visiting stores in higher SEP neighbourhoods post policy implementation. None of the included papers reached the highest quality score.
Conclusions: The current evidence describing the impact of menu energy labelling within or across SEP is limited in quantity and quality. Of the two studies that reported a positive benefit of menu energy labelling overall, both identified a greater effect on fast food purchases among consumers visiting stores in high compared to low SEP neighbourhoods. It is difficult to know whether the absence of effectiveness reported in low SEP populations represents a true lack of effectiveness or is a result of a more general lack of policy effectiveness or the limited quality of the reviewed studies.

Contents

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1. Introduction

In high-income countries, overweight and obesity are socioeconomically patterned whereby the prevalence of overweight and obesity is disproportionally higher among those with a lower socioeconomic position (SEP) compared to those with a higher SEP (Devaux & Sassi, 2013; McLaren, 2007). Nevertheless, very little is known about the impact of specific obesity prevention interventions on these existing inequalities. A recent systematic review on the effectiveness of obesity prevention interventions on adiposity outcomes according to SEP concluded that health equity is rarely considered in the evaluation of obesity prevention interventions. In the studies that did evaluate the differential effect of an intervention by SEP, information based interventions were more likely to have a greater impact for higher SEP groups compared to lower SEP groups (Beauchamp, Backholer, Magliano, & Peeters, 2014).

As an increasing amount of meals are consumed out of home, (Kant & Graubard, 2004) the provision of energy information on menus and menu boards at restaurants and food outlets (i.e. menu energy labelling) has become an increasingly valuable tool to empower consumers to make healthy choices at these outlets (New South Wales Food Authority, 2010; Stein, 2010). A number of countries and jurisdictions around the world have implemented, or are implementing, menu energy labelling policies, (New South Wales Food Authority, 2010; Stein, 2010) most notably in the United States. (Stein, 2010; 111th Congress, 2010) Current evidence in this area suggests that menu energy labelling may have a small to negligible effect at improving dietary choices at the population level (Harnack & French, 2008; Kiszko, Martinez, Abrams, & Elbel, 2014). However, significant heterogeneity exists between studies. Although several studies have attempted to examine the effect of menu energy labelling across different SEP groups, there has been no systematic review and critical analysis of the current evidence base to conclude on the likely health equity impact of this policy.

This study aims to review evidence of the impact of menu energy labelling across socioeconomic strata. For the purpose of this review we analysed the effect of menu energy labelling on a range of outcomes, including: awareness of exposure, understanding, food or energy purchased or consumed, and body mass index (BMI; or other adiposity indicators).

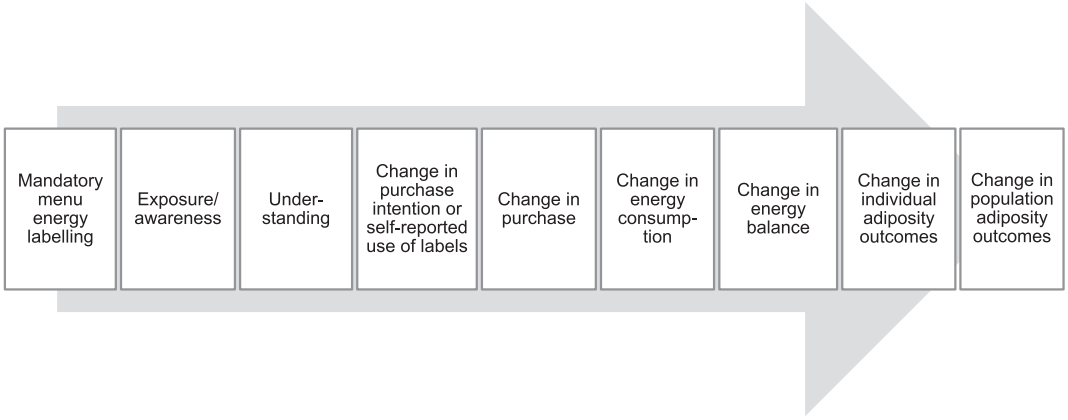

Fig. 1. Intervention logic pathway describing the stages for menu energy labelling to have an effect on population levels of obesity. Where evidence was available differential effectiveness of menu energy labelling by SEP on each of these outcomes was evaluated.