

The impact of ecolabels on the environmental impact of cafeteria purchases: a randomised controlled trial

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Meeting global climate targets will require a marked reduction in environmental impacts caused by dietary patterns⁽¹⁾. Ecolabels – indicating the environmental impact of products – have been shown to reduce the environmental impact of food selections in studies using an online experimental supermarket^(2,3), but their effectiveness in settings involving real food purchases is unclear⁽⁴⁾. This study examined the effectiveness of ecolabels at reducing the environmental impact of purchases in worksite cafeterias. Worksite cafeterias (n = 28) were randomised to either control (no labels) or ecolabel conditions. Between May and September 2021, sites in the ecolabel condition (n = 13) labelled hot meals with their environmental impact (scored from A-E), placed next to the name of the meal on printed menus. Mixed effect regression models examined the impact of labelling on the mean environmental impact (EcoScore; 1 = lowest impact; 100 = highest impact) of meals purchased each week. Ethics approval was granted 02/12/2020 by the Central University Research Ethics Committee, University of Oxford (Ref: R72710/RE001). The mean EcoScore of meals purchased at baseline was 67.9 (s.d. 10.9) in control sites vs. 70.3 (s.d. 8.6) for intervention sites; and during the intervention period was 69.9 (SD 9.0) for control sites vs. 71.3 (s.d. 8.4) for intervention sites. There was no evidence of an impact of ecolabels on the mean environmental impact of meals purchased either in intention-to-treat (-1.01, 95%CI -3.11 to 1.08) or per-protocol (-0.90, 95%CI -2.81 to 1.01) analyses. The majority of main meal options sold were rated 'E' in both control and intervention sites. When ecolabels were applied to hot meals within worksite cafeterias, the environmental impact of food purchases overall was unchanged. However, the potential effectiveness was limited by the narrow range of options available.

References

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