



New labelling regulations are here

Healthy food choices are an integral part of a healthy lifestyle. South Africa is one of many countries that committed themselves to implementing the World Health Organisation's (WHO) Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health – an international initiative aimed at the improvement of human health worldwide.

As a member of the WHO, the South African department of health supports this initiative and is of the view that the country can practically implement this strategy by means of healthy food choices, improved nutrition and accurate and fair labelling practices.

The existing food labelling regulations (R2034 of 29 October 1993) published under the *Foodstuffs, Cosmetics and Disinfectants Act, 1972 (Act 54 of 1972)*, which have been in place for a number of years, had some shortcomings that needed to be addressed.

It is for this reason that the minister of health approved the new *Regulations related to the Labelling and Advertising of Foodstuffs* in terms of the above-mentioned act and which were published in the *Government Gazette* on 1 March 2010 as Government Notice R146.

What the regulations state

The regulations are aimed at ensuring that consumers have access to properly and accurately labelled foodstuffs, which will in turn assist them, among others, in making informed food choices. The regulations also provide clear guidance on the do's and don'ts of the information provided on the labels and in advertisements of foodstuffs, which will be beneficial to both consumers and manufacturers.

Manufacturers of foodstuffs, both nationally and internationally in respect of imported foodstuffs, will be obliged to adapt their label-

ling accordingly. However, the implementation thereof will come into effect 12 months from the date of publication (i.e. from 1 March 2011) to provide for most of the labelling requirements included in the new regulations.

The draft Food Labelling and Advertising

Regulations were published for comments in July 2007 and, after considering the large volume of comments received and further consultation with relevant stakeholders, the department decided to deal with the finalisation of the regulations in two phases.

Phase one

The first phase was concluded with the publication of the new regulations on 1 March 2010, with the contents covering, among others, the following aspects:

- **“Use by” date:** To be mandatory on perishable pre-packaged foodstuffs and a prohibition regarding the sale thereof after the date has expired, as it relates to the safety and/or suitability of the products in question.
- **“Best before” date:** To be mandatory for non-perishables, but no prohibition placed on the sale thereof after the date has expired in view of it relating only to optimum freshness.
- **Batch number and physical address** of the manufacturer to ensure traceability.
- Declaration of common **food related allergens.**
- **List of ingredients** declaration to contain vital information regarding the contents of the foodstuff, e.g. colourants, preservatives, etc.
- Correctness of **nutritional information** to support validity of nutrient content claims, e.g. “high fibre” or “trans-fat free”, etc.
- **Quantitative ingredient declarations (QUID)** to place special emphasis on the presence of a specific ingredient, e.g. % olive oil in margarine.
- **Nutrient contents/comparative** claims (e.g. “low fat” vs “reduced fat” claims).

Phase 2

The second phase of the process related to the regulation of the labelling of foodstuffs by the department, depends on factors such as the development of a nutrient profiling model suitable and applicable to South African conditions.

Some of the issues that have been put on hold for addressing during the second phase, are:

- Health claims on foodstuffs.
- Serving sizes.
- The Glycaemic Index (GI) aspect.
- Determining the list of foodstuffs considered to be not essential for a healthy diet.

The aspect of advertising of food and beverages to children will also be addressed, pending the final recommendations by the World Health Organisation on this matter, which will be tabled for adoption at the meeting of the World Health Assembly scheduled for May 2010.

The guidelines (which have the same status as the regulations) to assist industry and other stakeholders regarding the practical implementation and interpretation of the new regulations, are available on the department of health’s website under the Directorate: Food Control’s web page.

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(Press release issued by the department of health). **M&J**