

Health Star Rating System gets Zero Stars from Nutritionist

Next time you visit the supermarket you may notice a number of stars jumping out at you on the bottom of packages. May I introduce you to the newest marketing campaign to persuade you to buy processed nutrient poor food. This Health Star Rating System (HSR) has been developed by the Federal Government to add even more confusion to the already dreaded chore of grocery shopping.

The HSR system is supposed to help you choose the healthier products by allocating a star rating to a product from a measly half a star to a 'nutritious' five stars. The amount of stars depends on the type of food, it's calories, and then also considers what they have deemed risk nutrients (saturated fats, sugars and sodium) and positive nutrients (protein, fibre and proportion of fruits/vegetables/legumes/nuts) per 100g or 100ml.

I am outraged at the release of this system which will by no means result in consumers having more knowledge about which foods are most nutritious. Firstly let's look at the 'risk nutrients'. Emerging modern day research is now showing that saturated fats may not be the enemy and in fact are not associated with increased risk of cardiovascular disease, but can actually be beneficial^(1,2,3). Take coconut oil for example, which is 94% saturated fat, but the system does not take into account that 50% of that fat is medium chain triglycerides which are thought to be metabolized differently providing more energy and anti-microbial effects^(4,5,6). On the Star System any products using coconut oil would have a low rating because of the 'risky' saturated fat. The fats that should be considered risky are trans fats yet these do not come into the equation at all with refined margarine rating at 3.5 stars, the same as olive oil!

What is even more outrageous is that additives and preservatives are completely ignored with this new system. Sanatorium are raving that their new reduced sugar Up & Go is five stars, however would you buy this for your kids knowing these were some of the ingredients: wheat maltodextrin, soy protein, cane sugar, vegetable oils (sunflower, canola), flavours, inulin, hi-maize™ starch, food acid (332), vegetable gums (460, 466, 407), stabiliser (452), salt? I sure hope not!

Furthermore, the system can reward products that have travelled a million miles and gone through 10 or more refining processes before reaching the supermarket shelves. As a Nutritionist that advocates local, natural whole foods this is simply deplorable.

When we look at the 'positive' nutrients, of course it is great that products high in protein, fibre vegetables, fruit, nuts and legumes result in more stars, but what about the commonly deficient omega-3 fatty acids, B or D vitamins and minor minerals? Products are being promoted as nutritious yet the full nutritional value is not accounted for. Water crackers are likely to rate high because they have no 'risk' nutrients and are low in calories, yet they are made of refined wheat flour, palm oil, salt and a raising agent, resulting in negligible nutrition value.

My final criticism is that the star Rating System is voluntary. If my product didn't rate above 3 stars then of course I am not going to disclose this to the public. It will be taken on board by large scale manufacturers that can afford the expense of calculating the stars for their products with smaller companies products being overlooked even though they might be 5 stars with no preservatives and additives.

In my opinion, if it has a packet or package to print any number of stars on it should **not** be a regular item in your shopping bag in the first place! Forget the stars that are essentially trying to con you that after being refined and processed these products can still be 'healthy'. Choose foods that have come straight from the plant, animal or earth where no calculations are needed to prove it's nutritional value.

References :

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