Health Star Ratings:

How they are calculated

What is the Health Star Ratings system?

It is a voluntary front-of-pack labelling system for packaged foods. The system rates foods from half a star to five stars based on their nutrient content.

The selection of nutrients used to analyse and rate packaged foods reflects the New Zealand Eating and Activity Guidelines (EAG). All packaged foods contain a variety of nutrients in different amounts. The system works by calculating the contribution of key nutrients to the overall nutrient content of the packaged food and assigning a rating score.

Algorithm explained

Health Stars are calculated by an algorithm that assigns points based on the nutrient content of 100 grams (or mls) of a food. The algorithm was developed by a working group of public health, government and industry experts using current evidence and dietary guidelines. It is based on the Nutrient Profiling Scoring Criteria developed as part of Standard 1.2.7 of the joint Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code.

The algorithm considers the negative nutrients the EAG recommends eating less of (energy, saturated fat, sugars, sodium), and positive nutrients the EAG recommends eating more of (protein, dietary fibre, fruits, vegetables, nuts and legumes). Health Stars are calculated by balancing these negative and positive components of the food per 100 grams (or mls) with the algorithm adjusted for different categories of foods. Negative points can be partially offset by points accumulated for positive nutrients.

Health Star Ratings are designed so that all risk-associated (negative) nutrients have roughly twice the impact on final scores compared with the beneficial-offset (positive) nutrients. Foods with

In a nutshell

- The Health Stars algorithm provides an overall assessment of the key components of a packaged food (both positive and negative) and gives an "at a glance" rating.

- The energy, saturated fat, sugar and sodium content of food has much greater impact on the Health Star Rating than the positive nutrients.

- All foods contribute energy to the diet. Eating too much of any food (even a five star-rated food) will contribute excess energy.

- Health Star Ratings are a voluntary front-of-pack labelling system for packaged foods. They provide a quick easy way for shoppers to compare similar packaged foods and choose the healthier option. The more stars, the healthier the packaged food.

a high concentration of one of the risk associated nutrients eg, high sugar content are dealt with harshly by the system. They accumulate both sugar and energy points. It is important to note fruit, vegetable, nut and legume content must be over 40% of the total food before they can start counting towards Health Stars and improve the rating. Adding small amounts of these ingredients to a food will not increase the number of Health Stars a food gets.

Health Stars has led to some manufacturers reformulating their products in order to improve the nutritional profile and achieve a better rating. This is one of the desired outcomes of the system.

Why we shouldn't focus on a single nutrient

- A number of nutrients contribute to our health or risk of developing disease. The EAG encourages people to choose a wide range of foods in order to provide all the essential nutrients needed. A focus on avoiding or eating one particular nutrient can inadvertently result in an unhealthy diet.

- EAG recommendations to limit sugar intake refer specifically to free sugars. Free sugars include all sugar added to food as well as those present in fruit juice, syrups and honey. This recommendation does not apply to the sugar that is found naturally in the structure of foods, such as whole fruit and dairy products.

- There are also many foods associated with non-communicable disease risk that have very low sugar content, such as foods high in saturated fat or sodium. The Health Star Rating system will identify these and assign low scores.

Why do we need Health Stars?

- People generally know fresh fruits and vegetables are healthy but can find it difficult to interpret labels on packaged foods. Health Stars are designed to help people choose the healthier options when buying packaged foods.

- Many healthy foods undergo some processing and packaging, such as milk, rolled oats, tinned tomatoes and frozen vegetables. Health Stars help people choose which packaged food is healthier.

- Not everyone has the time to read the nutrition information panel on the pack, or the time and resources to buy and prepare only whole foods – packaged foods are a reality of life for most families. Health Stars make it quick and easy to compare similar packaged foods (eg, breakfast cereals with other breakfast cereals) when grocery shopping.

More information online

- From Ministry for Primary Industries: **mpi.govt.nz/healthstars**

- From HPA: **nutritionandactivity.govt.nz/ health-star-ratings**

0.5 HEALTH STAR RATING   3.5 HEALTH STAR RATING   5 HEALTH STAR RATING

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Manatū Ahu Matua

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