



Behind the hype:

Using Health Stars to choose healthier packaged foods

What is the issue?

There's a lot of conflicting information about what to eat. For a reliable source of consistent evidence-based advice, use the Ministry of Health's Eating and Activity Guidelines. Health Stars for packaged food complement these and both aim to assist New Zealanders to make healthier food choices.

What are the Eating and Activity Guidelines?

The NZ Eating and Activity Guidelines (EAG) provide evidence-based population guidance on eating well and being physically active. Research shows New Zealanders consume too much saturated fat and sodium, and not enough dietary fibre. Only 41% of New Zealanders eat the recommended daily servings of fruits and vegetables.

Making good choices about what and how much to eat and drink, and being physically active are important for good health. The EAG recommendations are:

1. Eat a variety of nutritious food every day including:
 - plenty of vegetables and fruit
 - grain foods, mostly whole grain and those naturally high in fibre
 - some milk and milk products, mostly low and reduced fat
 - some legumes, nuts, seeds, fish and other seafood, eggs, poultry, and/or red meat with the fat removed.
2. Choose and/or prepare foods and drinks:
 - with unsaturated fats (canola, olive, rice bran or vegetable oil or margarine) instead of saturated fats (butter, lard, dripping, coconut oil)
 - that are low in salt – if using salt, use iodised salt

- with little or no added sugar
 - that are mostly whole or less processed.
3. Make plain water the first choice over other drinks.
 4. If drinking alcohol, keep intake low. Stop drinking alcohol if you could be pregnant, are pregnant or are trying to get pregnant.
 5. Buy or gather, prepare, cook and store food in ways that keep it safe to eat.

The EAG recommends people follow an eating pattern based on whole or less-processed foods.

In a nutshell

- The Eating and Activity Guidelines provide evidence-based advice about how to choose a healthy diet.
- All foods consist of different nutrients in differing amounts. No single food provides all the nutrients the body needs.
- Health Stars assist New Zealanders to choose healthier packaged foods.
- It is important to consider all of the components in a packaged food rather than judging a food based on a single component eg, sugar. Health Stars provide an assessment of a packaged food based on the content of nutrients as defined in the Eating and Activity Guidelines.

Some processed foods can provide quick healthy ingredients for meals (eg, frozen vegetables, tinned fruit). If using processed foods, look for Health Stars to help choose the healthier products.

How are the number of stars determined for packaged foods?

The algorithm that calculates the Health Stars considers both the negative nutrients the EAG recommends eating less of (energy, saturated fat, sugars, sodium), and the positive nutrients the EAG recommends eating more of (protein, dietary fibre, fruits, vegetables, nuts and legumes). Health Star Ratings are calculated by balancing these negative and positive components of the food per 100 gram, with the algorithm adjusted for different categories of foods.

What do the EAG say about nutrients in the Health Star Rating algorithm?

Nutrient	EAG advice
Energy	Excess energy intake can lead to weight gain
Saturated fat	Reducing saturated fats and partially replacing it with unsaturated fats is linked with a decreased risk of cardiovascular disease
Sugar	Consuming free sugars is linked with excess body weight and tooth decay
Sodium	New Zealanders consume more sodium than is recommended. Consuming less sodium reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease and stroke

Nutrient	EAG advice
Protein	New Zealanders are recommended to eat at least one serving of fish, and other seafood, eggs, poultry or red meat a day, or at least two servings of legumes, nuts and seeds
Fibre	Eating high fibre whole grain foods is linked with a lower risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, weight gain and some cancers
Fruits and vegetables	Provide vitamins, minerals and dietary fibre. Less than half of New Zealanders (41%) eat the recommended three serves of vegetables and two serves of fruit each day
Nuts and legumes	Legumes and nuts are rich in nutrients, high in fibre, and are a source of protein

More information online

- From HPA: nutritionandactivity.govt.nz/
- From Ministry of Health: health.govt.nz/our-work/eating-and-activity-guidelines
- From Ministry for Primary Industries: mpi.govt.nz/healthstars

