New phone app will aid healthy food and drink choices

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FoodSwitch app allows shoppers to make healthy food and drink choices. Credit: George Institute

(Medical Xpress)—A free smartphone app has been launched to help shoppers in the UK make healthier food and drink choices.

FoodSwitch allows people to use their smartphone camera to scan the barcode of a product and get clear nutritional information on over 80,000 packaged food and drinks sold in supermarkets.

The app provides easy to understand 'traffic light' ratings on a range of different factors important to health, including fats, sugars, salt, protein and fibre. FoodSwitch also suggests similar, healthier products to help

consumers who wish to reduce the levels of fat, salt and sugar in their families' diets.

The FoodSwitch app is available for both iPhones and Android phones, and was developed by the George Institute for Global Health along with researchers from two departments at Oxford University, Consensus Action on Salt and Health (CASH), and Medical Research Council Human Nutrition Research.

The aim is to help customers make more informed decisions when doing their weekly shop, in turn reducing their risk of ill health through poor diets.

Dr Peter Scarborough works in the British Heart Foundation Health Promotion Research Group at Oxford University, which has long been interested in nutrient profiling and the promotion of public health. He says: 'With all the messages about health in the public eye, it is hard for consumers to know what is "healthy". The established nutrition criteria used in the app shows customers products that are healthier overall, not just whether they are higher in salt, fat or sugar.'

The traffic light labels show at a glance if the product you may be thinking about buying has high, medium or low amounts of fat, saturated fat, sugars and salt. The idea is to choose products with fewer red circles, while the more green circles there are, the healthier the choice is.

When the barcode of a food or drink product is scanned by a smartphone, FoodSwitch searches its database and identifies healthier products by comparing the overall nutritional value of the product to existing criteria laid down by the Department of Health.

Sugars, fats and salt are associated with health problems such as obesity, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes and high blood cholesterol. FoodSwitch's overall rating also takes into account fibre, protein and fruit and vegetables. This means the healthier choices shown not only have a better balance of salt, sugars and fats but are also healthier overall based on well-researched criteria.

Professor Susan Jebb of Oxford University's Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences says: 'A poor diet is responsible for tens of thousands of premature deaths every year in the UK. People will be able to use this smartphone technology to swap the foods in their regular shopping basket for healthier options to help themselves and their families to cut their risk of diabetes, heart disease and some cancers.'

Where products are not listed in the database, shoppers are invited to use the app to take photos of missing products, which will then be validated and added to the database for future use.

Nutritionist Katharine Jenner, campaign director of CASH and FoodSwitch UK, says: 'FoodSwitch puts the shopper back in control. It is not about telling people to stop eating or avoid certain foods with red colours but rather highlighting differences in products. This new app will allow people to take responsibility for their individual and their family's health, and improve their eating habits in an easy and fun way.'

Provided by Oxford University

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