

Study of supermarket meals gives food for thought

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With more people eating at home due to COVID-19, new Curtin

research has found more than half of Australian supermarket own-brand, chilled, ready-made meals are unhealthy and 94 percent are 'ultra-processed' – yet more than 80 percent are labeled with a 'pass mark' under the Health Star Rating system.

The research, published today in Public Health Nutrition, analyzed 291 store brand refrigerated convenience foods, including [ready meals](#), quiches, soups, pies and desserts, sold in Coles and Woolworths in 2017.

Lead researcher Dr. Claire Pulker from the School of Public Health at Curtin University said 54 percent of the [meals](#) were found to be unhealthy according to the Australian Guide to Healthy Eating with Coles meals faring worse than Woolworths' – 70 percent compared to 44 percent.

"Our study also rated meals using the NOVA classification system and found almost all of the [supermarket](#) brand chilled meals were ultra-processed. That means they contained industrial ingredients, colors, flavors, emulsifiers, stabilizers, and thickeners," Dr. Pulker said.

"Despite this only 19 percent of the meals scored less than a 'pass mark' of two and a half [stars](#) under the five star Health Star Rating system.

"The Health Star Rating label should help guide [healthy food choices](#) but is currently failing to give appropriately low scores to the meals to avoid."

The study found the more unhealthy choices for consumers included pizza, pies, quiche, garlic bread and naan, dressed salads such as potato salad, prepared meats and desserts.

Dr. Pulker said the study showed huge variation in the nutritional quality of supermarket chilled meals, which was putting consumers' health at

risk.

"More and more Australians are buying convenient meals when they shop, particularly with dining out options being reduced by the pandemic, but it's currently not easy to choose a healthy fresh meal from Australia's major supermarkets," Dr. Pulker said.

"While there are many healthy options available, the wide variation can make it confusing for consumers. The best advice is to choose look at the ingredients lists on chilled meals which include vegetables, salad, or legumes as key ingredients, or better still make your own."

The [research paper](#) is titled "The nutritional quality of supermarket own brand, chilled convenience foods: an Australian cross-sectional study reveals limitations of the Health Star Rating."

More information: Claire Elizabeth Pulker et al. The nutritional quality of supermarket own brand chilled convenience foods: an Australian cross-sectional study reveals limitations of the Health Star Rating, *Public Health Nutrition* (2020). [DOI: 10.1017/S1368980020000051](#)

Provided by Curtin University

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