

The piles of sugar hidden from shoppers by food manufacturers

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New research shows that two thirds of all packaged foods on supermarket shelves contain added sugars—including some you might not expect—and they're hard to identify, thanks to confusing terms used by food manufacturers.

The annual FoodSwitch: State of the Food Supply report found more than 400 different names for added sugars on packaged foods labels, making it impossible for consumers to identify and cut back, as advised in the Australian Dietary Guidelines.

George Institute Dietitian Dr. Daisy Coyle said that this "added [sugar](#) by stealth" meant some Aussies were consuming up to 22 teaspoons per day—nearly twice the maximum limit recommended by the World Health Organization.

"Too much sugar is contributing to spiraling rates of obesity and associated [chronic diseases](#) such as heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes," she said.

"But while most of us know it's bad for us, cutting back is hard when you can't tell how much is in the food you are buying—right now, manufacturers are only required to list total sugars on the product's nutrition information panel."

In the report, George Institute researchers used the Government-developed Health Star Rating (HSR) system criteria to assess over 25,000 packaged food and drinks being sold in supermarkets across Australia.

It found that out of the big four supermarkets, Woolworths own-brands still have the highest overall healthiness rating with Coles and IGA in joint [second place](#) and ALDI coming in as least healthy.

But Dr. Coyle said the fact that there had been little change in the overall healthiness of the food supply in the last few years indicates that a different approach is now needed.

"One of the biggest barriers to success of the HSR program is that it

remains voluntary—we found only 41 percent of products displayed an HSR on pack—so there isn't a level playing field," she said.

"And while the top 20 manufacturers have higher rates of uptake at around 70 percent, there is huge variation, with no Peters Ice Cream products displaying an HSR on pack to over 96 percent for The Smith's Snackfood Company products."

"Most notably IGA has chosen not to participate in the HSR scheme at all, even though they are one of Australia's biggest retailers," Dr. Coyle added.

Although the voluntary HSR system has been in place since 2014, compliance remains low at around 40 percent, and this has worsened since last year's report. Although the Government has set industry a benchmark of 70 percent compliance by 2025, there is little evidence that this target will be achieved and still no firm commitment to make the system mandatory if it is not.

However, Food Ministers are soon to open a public consultation on proposed changes to food labels that would require foods to display the added sugar content on the nutritional information panel. Dr. Coyle said that while this was an important step towards helping Australians make informed choices, any changes were likely to take some time to be adopted.

"Currently, the only way shoppers can tell how much added sugar is in a product is by downloading the FoodSwitch App and scanning the barcode—this will give an estimate of added [sugar content](#), as well as suggesting healthier alternatives to switch to," she added.

The report also revealed some of the more surprising switches that could make a significant dent in sugar consumption over the course of a year:

- Greek yogurt—Switching from Jalna Pot Set Original Sweet & Creamy Greek Yogurt to Chobani Plain Greek Yogurt could save you 20.5 teaspoons per 2kg tub or around 4 ½ kilo-bags of added sugars a year, if you consumed one tub of yogurt a week.
- Granola—Switching from Carman's Crunchy Oat Clusters Cranberry, Apple & Roasted Nut to Jordans Low Sugar Granola Almond & Hazelnut could save you 28.5 teaspoons per 500g box or around 3kg of added sugars a year, if you consumed one box a fortnight.
- BBQ sauce—switching from Masterfoods BBQ Sauce to Fountain BBQ Sauce could save 50.5 teaspoons of added sugar per 500ml bottle, or around 2.5kg of added sugar over a year if you consumed a bottle per month.

"Consumers deserve to know what's in the food they are eating, and we strongly support having the amount of added sugar in a product clearly spelt out. This could also prompt the food industry to reduce the amount of sugar they're pouring into processed foods," Dr. Coyle said.

"We don't want shoppers to have to wait years for this information, we want people to be able to make informed choices now—small changes can really add up."

More information: Report: [www.georgeinstitute.org/media- ... y-food-manufacturers](http://www.georgeinstitute.org/media-...y-food-manufacturers)

Provided by George Institute for Global Health

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