

# We looked at the health star rating of 20,000 foods and this is what we found

July 3 2020, by Alexandra Jones, Bruce Neal and Maria Shahid

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

As you read this, health officials are busy finalising the government's [review](#) of the health star rating system on packaged foods.

One of the issues the review is looking at is whether the system, which has been voluntary in Australia and New Zealand since its launch in

2014, should become mandatory.

This is something [public health](#) and [consumer groups](#) have [called for](#), but the [food industry](#) has [opposed](#).

Our [new research](#), which looked at [health](#) star ratings of 20,000 packaged foods, shows why mandatory health stars on all packaged food is needed.

We found less than half of all eligible foods carried them, and those that did were skewed towards foods with higher ratings.

## **Remind me, what is the health star rating?**

The health star system rates products from [0.5 to 5.0 stars](#) to help guide consumers toward [healthier choices](#) when browsing the supermarket shelves. When comparing similar products, the general idea is the higher the [star rating](#), the healthier the food.

However, the government's [review](#) is meant to address criticism the food industry has "[gamed](#)" the system by exploiting loopholes in scoring criteria to allow some products high in sugar and salt to still score relatively highly.

While much attention has been directed towards closing these loopholes, public health and consumer groups would also like to see mandatory labelling.

## **Here's what we did and what we found**

We looked at health stars on packaged food in Australia between 2014 and 2019. We used the [FoodSwitch](#) database, which contains

information about the labelling and nutrition of packaged food.

Every year, FoodSwitch is updated by photographing labels of all packaged foods and beverages in four large supermarkets in metropolitan Sydney. That's a total of about 20,000 unique products.

For each year in this [study](#), we recorded whether a product was displaying a health star rating and its value.

Where a product was not showing stars on the pack, we calculated how that product would rate using available nutrition information and applying the government's [calculator](#).

This gave us an idea of what information manufacturers were not yet providing consumers.

We also looked at the manufacturer of each product, and flagged whether they were represented on the [committee](#) overseeing implementation of the health stars system.

## **Voluntary use remains disappointing**

We found uptake of food star ratings has increased steadily over the past five years. But only about 41% of eligible products carried one.

Retailers Coles, Woolworths and Aldi labelled their own private label brands, accounting for about 56% of all health star ratings. Despite this leadership, these retailers were not involved in the implementation committee.

However, members of the industry group the [Australian Food and Grocery Council](#)—involved in [developing](#) health stars and represented on the [implementation committee](#)—were responsible for only 29% of

total uptake.

## **Selective use, on healthier products**

Perhaps unsurprisingly with voluntary labelling, health stars were more likely to appear on products with higher ratings. More than three-quarters of all stars were on products rated 3.0 or higher.

With a few exceptions, including McCain Foods, Coles and Woolworths, nearly all companies were more likely to show stars on their higher-scoring products.

We found significant differences between the average rating of products displaying the health star rating, and those made by the same manufacturer not showing a health star rating.

For example, Nestlé showed stars on its Uncle Toby's breakfast cereals where they scored an average 3.9 stars. But the company did not provide the star logo on its confectionery range, which received an average 1.4 stars.

## **A voluntary system puts profits before health**

Our results illustrate the limits of commercial goodwill in applying health stars voluntarily.

Selective use allows the food industry to market its products as healthy but denies consumers the chance to make meaningful comparisons between products.

In particular, the voluntary system limits consumers' ability to identify and avoid less healthy foods.

With the government review set to be finalised in mid-July, our work supports arguments for an improved health star [rating](#) system to be made mandatory to ensure the system works for consumers, not just food companies.

## Here's what needs to happen next

Making health stars mandatory will take time. However, [health officials](#) must commit now to a concrete and public plan to proceed down this path by a specific date in the likely event that uptake remains patchy.

Over the same period the health stars system has been operating, Australian manufacturers have implemented new requirements for mandatory [country of origin labelling](#).

If we're willing to use regulation to provide consumers more information about where their food comes from, we should be doing the same to provide more information about how healthy their [food](#) is too.

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