

behindtheheadlines

New star on the block

There's a new food labelling system in town - but is it actually going to help us make better choices at the supermarket? HFG dietitian Zoe Wilson investigates.



HFG dietitian Zoe Wilson also runs nutrition clinics in the Sydney area

Reading the labels of packaged foods in the supermarket can be a bit of a minefield. With claims like 'high in calcium' or 'no-added-sugar', plus a nutrition information panel and an ingredients list in microscopic print, it's easy to get confused.

Now, there's a new kid on the block. Just like an energy star rating system on fridges and microwaves, in the next year or so you'll start to see a similar logo on everyday food items in the supermarket.

The new health star rating system was approved this June, after two years of collaboration between government, public health organisations and the food industry. The aim is to make it easier for you to choose between the healthy and not-so-healthy products on the shelves. A food will get a star-rating and a number,

A food will get a star rating based on the nutrition content

between 0.5 and 5, based on the nutrition content of the product. The more stars it has, the healthier the product.

The rating is determined by the amount of saturated fat, sugar, salt and kilojoules (too high in any of these will bring the rating down) as well as fibre, protein, fruit and vegie contents (which will bring the star rating up).

The system is voluntary for now, and the government plans to review how widely adopted it is in two years' time and consider making it mandatory.

But will this system make a difference? Debate has been raging for years on the best way to label products.

Consumer research shows current labelling is confusing and in need of a revamp. And the overall consensus for the new rating system is positive (though there are differing views on the nutrition criteria that it is based on). However, the jury is out on whether or not it will



actually *change* the products we buy.

I believe most of us struggle to work out if a product is a healthy one, and this is a good way to do that. This system should make it easy for busy people to see at a glance if a product is a healthy option.

I think it will also make it easier for people who do care about their health but don't necessarily know a lot about nutrition, to see their healthier options in the shops. From a consumer's perspective, this can only be a positive move.

However, I also think consistency is key. There needs to be an effective awareness campaign about the new star rating system and how it works, i.e. a high score is a healthy score - and they need to be on all products, so it's easy to compare and we're not just confusing the issue further. [hfg](#)