Heading for the Stars:
The progress of the Health Star Rating roll-out in Australia

A Health Policy Report - December 2015

This report was prepared by the Food Policy Division at The George Institute for Global Health.

The George Institute for Global Health was ranked among the top 10 research institutions in the world for scientific impact by the Scimago Institutions Rankings (SIR) World Reports in 2011, 2012, 2013 & 2014.
**Background**

In June 2014 the Health Star Rating (HSR) Front of Pack Labelling Scheme was introduced on a 5 year voluntary basis to assist consumers to make healthier food choices. The HSR provides interpretative information about the nutritional quality of products with regard to energy, saturated fat, sugar, sodium and certain ‘positive’ components (fruit, vegetable, nuts and legumes content, and for some foods fibre and protein) on the front of packages. Products are ranked from half a star (least healthy) to five stars (most healthy).

The HSR system is an Australian government initiative developed in collaboration with industry, public health and consumer groups. The aim was to simplify the nutrition information presented on pack for consumers and facilitate healthier choices. Currently the nutrition information listed on food packages in the form of the nutrition information panel can be difficult for consumers to understand and interpret. The HSR is designed to make it easier for consumers to determine healthier choices by enabling quick comparisons between products within the same product category (like with like) e.g. a breakfast cereal with 5 stars instead of one with 4 stars.

**Objectives and methods**

The aim of this survey is to describe the progress of the HSR roll-out in Australia 16 months after the system was introduced on a voluntary basis. The number of food companies that have committed to displaying the HSR and the number of products on the supermarket shelves with the HSR were determined. The food categories that have the greatest number of products with the HSR were described.

In September 2015, four supermarkets in Sydney’s CBD (Woolworths, Coles, Aldi and IGA) were systematically searched to determine the number of products with the HSR. Data were entered into The George Institute’s Branded Food Composition Database according to a standardised procedure. Where exactly the same product was available in more than one supermarket is was only counted once. The food companies that we could identify as having one or more product displaying the HSR were contacted, provided with the data collected in the four supermarkets and given the opportunity to provide comment. Results are presented as the number of products on the shelf with the HSR in the four stores surveyed, including the same product in different package sizes. Data identified by the survey and supplemented by the food companies were used to estimate the number of products with the HSR available in Australia.

**Main findings**

In September 2015, 714 products had the HSR in the four supermarkets surveyed in the Sydney CBD, which included products from 41 food companies, of which 39 were able to be contacted. Sixteen out of the companies contacted provided data about additional products (115) products, that we had not captured in our snapshot survey, with the HSR. Based on the supermarket survey and data provided by the food companies it is estimated that in excess of 1865 products with the HSR are now on supermarket shelves in Australia. It should be noted that many food companies advised us that they were rolling out new products on a regular basis.

The following 41 food companies have the HSR on their products: Andrews Meat Industries; Australian Wholefoods; Bundy Juice; Campbell Arnott’s; Carman’s Fine Foods; Chris’s Food Culture; Coca Cola Amatil; Coles; Fine Fettle Foods; Flavour Creations; Fonterra Brands Australia; Food For Health; Freedom Foods Group; Go Natural; Green’s General Foods; Hampden Trading; Healthfarm Fine Foods; HJ Heinz Company; Kellogg Company; Kez’s Kitchen; La Macelleria; Lion; Manassen Foods; Monster Health Food Co.; Natvia; Nestle Australia; Norco Co-operative Limited; Pictor Productions; Popina; Presha Fruit; PureBred Bakery; Rinoldi Pasta; Sanitarium; Simplot Australia; SPC Ardmona; Soul Fresh; SunPork Fresh Foods; Unilever Australia; Vitality Brands; Woolworths, YOU. sips bits dips.

Figure 1 shows the number of stars that were displayed on the products that had the HSR in the four stores surveyed in the Sydney CBD. 22% of products had a HSR value equal to or less than 3 stars. The majority of products (52%) in the four stores surveyed had 4 stars, and 14% of products had 5 health stars.

From the supermarket survey we found that the greatest number of products with the HSR were observed in the breakfast cereal category. Twenty four percent of the 714 products displaying the HSR were breakfast cereals. Ready-meals (9%), cereal-based bars (6%), canned fish (6%), juice (5%) and spreads (5%) were also categories where the HSR was predominately found.

**Discussion of findings**

The Government introduced the HSR system in June 2014 on a five-year voluntary basis. We estimate that in excess of 1865 products on the shelves in Australian supermarkets have the HSR on pack, representing 41 food companies. Monster Health Food Co. was the first food company to commit to displaying the HSR on their products in April 2014. In the later part of 2014 and first half of 2015 there has been an increase in the number of food companies rolling out the HSR on their products. Coles and Woolworths, Australia’s largest grocery retailers, are both displaying the HSR on their private label products.

During The George Institute’s annual data collection (between September and December 2014) in the same four Sydney supermarkets 80 products had the HSR. The additional ~1800 products with the HSR in 2015 shows that substantial progress has been made with the HSR roll out in the last 10 months.

Precisely how many Australian products could carry a HSR is unknown. Because food products are constantly changing and shifting, there is a robust debate about just how many food products there are at any one time. Our current FoodSwitch database contains some 60,000 packaged food products although we know some of these will now have been discontinued. We also know that our coverage of the packaged food supply is incomplete and some of the many new products introduced this year will not yet have been captured. The majority of items in the database can have an HSR calculated and the majority should carry an HSR under the existing scheme. In surveying the food product landscape and listening to informed stakeholders, we believe at least 30,000 (and possibly 40,000) Australian packaged products could carry an HSR.

Using the most conservative figure of 30,000 eligible products, the 1865 currently carrying the HSR represents ~6% of the target market. If the uptake of HSR labels use observed between 2014 and 2015...
continues at the same rate, then we estimate that by the end of the voluntary implementation period in 2019 about 9000 products (30% of the target market) will display a HSR label.

For the HSR system to fully deliver upon its aim of helping consumers to make healthier choices, the HSR needs to be displayed on all food products. For breakfast cereals, the category carrying the largest number of stars (174 products), this is already being achieved. For many other categories, however, there is still much progress to be made and a clear need for a coordinated HSR implementation strategy.

The store survey undercounted the number of products carrying HSR labels. This was a snapshot survey and only one store from each retailer was surveyed. The product range in store varies, so while we selected large stores, these stores do not range all branded and private label products. However, our data is likely to be representative of what shoppers encounter in major supermarkets in metropolitan areas.

It was interesting to note that in the four Sydney CBD stores surveyed, 22% of products with the HSR had a star rating of 3 or less and 2% of products were rated as 0.5 stars. While foods with low HSR scores are under-represented, it does show that some food companies are applying the HSR to their full product range. This is a truly responsible approach to HSR implementation which will maximally assist consumers in making healthier food choices, and is to be highly commended.

Conclusion

The implementation of HSR labels on Australian packaged foods has achieved a solid start and more products with stars are appearing every day. Government, industry, public health and consumer groups need to capitalise on the current momentum to ensure that at least three quarters of all products carry a HSR by 2019. Only with massive uptake will the HSR system deliver upon its potential to help all Australians to choose foods that are lower in nutrients linked to obesity and chronic disease, and live healthier and more productive lives.