

Hannaford says ratings steer shoppers to healthier foods

The more vitamins, minerals, fiber and whole grains in a product, the more stars it receives.

By DAVID SHARP The Associated Press September 6, 2007



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Because of their high sugar content, these juices receive just one star under Hannaford's rating system.

FALMOUTH — A gold star rating system aimed at helping food shoppers make healthier choices appears to have had some influence, meaning more Shredded Wheat and Raisin Bran in shopping carts.

Hannaford Bros., the Scarborough-based supermarket chain, said sales of items that earned at least one of three possible stars outpaced sales of similar products that got no stars.

The difference was greatest among packaged foods, including cereal, canned goods, bakery items and snack foods. Hannaford said sales of the products that got stars grew 2 times as fast as those of similar items deemed less healthy.

The system is based on a formula that Hannaford wants to patent. In general, vitamins, minerals, fiber and whole grains earn stars. Added sodium, trans fats, saturated fats and cholesterol mean fewer, or no, stars.

"I love it. I absolutely do," Donna Lewis of Falmouth said on Wednesday after pushing her cart through the checkout line with her 5-year-old son.

Lewis uses the star system to teach her children, including two other boys, about good nutrition. The star system makes nutrition simple, she said. Children easily understand it.

Some of Hannaford's ratings are no-brainers.

For example, whole milk gets no stars, 1 percent milk gets two stars and skim milk gets three stars. Whole-grain breads get more stars than standard white flour breads. Virtually all

fresh produce gets three stars.

As expected, Fruity Pebbles, Cap'n Crunch, Cocoa Puffs and similar sugar-laden cereals get no stars. Ditto for Campbell's Spaghetti's, Chef Boyardee Ravioli and Kraft Easy Mac. On the canned soup aisle, there are practically no stars at all.

But the star system contains some surprises, even for educated shoppers.

Mott's four flavors of "Healthy Harvest" applesauce in kid-sized serving containers get two stars. Right next to those on the shelf, Mott's "Scooby Doo!" "Pirates Punch" and "Mummy Berry" flavors, which have added sugar, get no stars.

Kim Marcotte of Falmouth was surprised to discover that a can of Nature's Place Organic green beans that she bought had 380 milligrams of salt. Del Monte Fresh Cut's "cut green beans" had only 10 milligrams of salt, earning it stars.

"I just assumed that because it was a vegetable, it would be good for you," said Marcotte, who tries to buy organic products for her young children.

Hannaford said data suggest that consumers are using the program.

Sales of star-rated frozen dinners grew 4 times as fast as sales of unstarred ones, and breakfast cereals with stars sold 3 times faster than other cereals, Hannaford said.

Among other findings, sales of star-rated ground beef grew 7 percent, while sales of other brands of ground beef declined 5 percent; chicken that earned stars grew 5 percent, while other chicken dropped 3 percent; fat-free milk grew 1 percent, and whole milk dropped 4 percent.

Only a few food areas, including seafood, showed no change.

"The fact that the movement of products with stars has been growing steadily since the introduction of the program suggests to me that customers are using the program," said Caren Epstein, spokeswoman for Hannaford.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest, a consumer advocacy group, said the findings are encouraging. "It's certainly a good step forward, and the entire supermarket industry is watching Hannaford," said Michael Jacobson, the nonprofit organization's executive director, in Washington.

Hannaford's ratings cover more than 25,000 items. The chain, with 160 stores in New England and New York, plans to begin including baby food on Sept. 15. Star ratings for oils will be in Hannaford stores later this year.

Already, the Guiding Stars program has expanded to another supermarket chain, Florida-based Sweetbay Supermarkets. Food Lion is expected to start the program next year, Epstein said. All three chains are owned by Delhaize America.

Food makers, the government and others are considering various ranking schemes. Hannaford will present its findings at a Food and Drug Administration hearing on Monday and Tuesday focusing on front-label nutrition symbols.

Marcotte, a shopper from Falmouth, said the Guiding Stars haven't changed her buying habits overall. But they have allowed her to spend less time studying food labels. "It has made it easier," she said. "When I go grocery shopping, I go to the back and look for two things: hydrogenated oils and high-fructose corn syrup. Now I don't have to spend as much time reading the back of boxes."

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