

Stars Used to Rate Foods for Nutrition

New England Grocery Chain Rates Foods With Stars in New 'Nutritional Navigation' System

By CANDICE CHOI

The Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. - Shredded wheat gets 3 stars. Baked beans, 1 star. Doritos, no stars.

Those movie-style ratings for food, launched by a New England grocery chain, take nutritional hand-holding to a new level.

Hannaford Bros. supermarkets says it's an effort to simplify choices for consumers, using gold-star shelf tags to mark the healthiest foods. The rating system is in 150 of its stores in upstate New York and New England.

Some experts agree it makes sense.

"There's a certain level of frustration in consumers trying to figure out all the different health claims," said Bill Greer, a spokesman for the Food Marketing Institute.

Under Hannaford's Guiding Stars program, "healthy" products are given 1 star, better choices get 2 and the best are given 3. Foods with no nutritional value get no stars at all.

The rankings are based on U.S. Department of Agriculture guidelines, with points earned for meeting recommended levels of nutrients like fiber and taken away for having too much of the bad stuff like saturated fats and sugar.

Of 27,000 food items in the store that were evaluated, only about a quarter of them earned at least one star. Some items like cooking oils, coffee or water were not evaluated.

"You don't have to have a nutrition degree to understand it," said Caren Epstein, spokeswoman for Hannaford, based in Scarborough, Maine.

The system gives shoppers a good baseline for understanding healthy eating, said Cathy Nonas, a registered nutritionist with the American Dietetic Association.

"It's a big step in the right direction," she said.

And at the right time. Federal statistics show two-thirds of Americans are overweight or obese.

Such guidance and support systems, once the forte of upscale and niche grocers, are moving into the mainstream. A survey this year by the Food Marketing Institute found 72 percent of supermarkets were offering some type of nutritional guidance, up from 67 percent in 2004.

At United Supermarkets in Texas, for example, a color code marks heart healthy foods with red tags and diabetic-friendly foods with purple tags. UKrop's Super Markets in Virginia offers consultations with a nutritionist for a fee.

Wegmans Food Markets Inc., a popular chain based in Rochester, N.Y., has a "Wellness Key" that stamps house brands with symbols indicating high-fiber, low-fat, low-calorie or sugar-free.

The Guiding Stars at Hannaford evaluated most of its foods packaged, frozen, fresh or prepared for nutritional value, but not for calories.

Produce like broccoli, blueberries and artichokes and cereal like Post Shredded Wheat get 3 stars. The Cinnamon Shredded Wheat gets 2 stars while a bag of Doritos gets no stars. Neither do any of the other foods devoid of significant nutrients.

"Consumers already know what's not good for them. This system isn't meant to police people's choices," said Dr. Lisa Sutherland, a pediatrician and Dartmouth College professor who helped develop the system for Hannaford.

The stars, attached to price tags that dangle from shelves, are discreet. Brochures and signs explaining the program will be posted in aisles, but the nutritional navigation system is "not in your face," Epstein said.

Company officials also note the system "is in no way a diet" and doesn't count calories.

Nonas, of the American Dietetic Association, said the grading system will naturally weed out many high-calorie foods. But those looking to lose weight will still need to examine food labels.

"Just because a product is healthier, doesn't mean it's the best choice," she said.

Still, company officials are confident the program will be widely used, saying a survey of customers showed 8 out of 10 favored nutritional guidance.

On the Net:

Hannaford Supermarkets, <http://www.hannaford.com>

American Dietetic Association, <http://www.eatright.org>

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