

Food firms forced to face scorecard over health claims

Sydney Morning Herald, August 25, 2012

MILO drink and Nutri-grain cereal are unhealthy, a new nutrient scorecard endorsed by health ministers says.

When the NSW Cancer Council tested a sample of packaged food and drinks using the new criteria, it found that Nestle Milo (if it wasn't made with skim milk) and Kellogg's Nutri-grain were unhealthy. In contrast, Milo Duo cereal passed the test as healthy.

The Nutrient Profiling Scoring Criteria was endorsed in July by health ministers to ensure "health claims only appeared on healthy food".



Winners and losers ...Milo drink failed the health test whilst Milo Duo cereal passed.

The Cancer Council applied the test to a sample of packaged food and drinks that make health claims, such as Nutri-grain's "protein for muscle development", and others promising "antioxidants to inhibit the damaging effects caused by free radicals in the body".

Popular children's snacks such as Bega Cheddar Cheese Stringers and Kraft Dairy Bites Cheesy Pops, both marketed as containing calcium for strong teeth and healthy bones, didn't pass the test either because they were high in fats and sodium. In contrast, Yoplait Smackers Smooth Yoghurt Tubes was assessed as healthy. The scorecard adds or subtracts points for fruit, vegetables, fibre, sodium, fats and protein.

Under the new regime, foods that contain high levels of sugar, fat and salt will not be able to claim health benefits. Only those that are judged as healthy will be able to make one of 115 approved health claims, such as calcium for healthy bones, to market their products.

If a manufacturer wants to make an unapproved health claim, such as one relating to probiotics, it will have to pass the health test first, and then substantiate the claim. The proposal to let industry self-substantiate these claims and provide its own evidence is opposed by consumer and health groups as putting the fox in charge of the hen house.

Clare Hughes, the NSW Cancer Council's nutrition program manager, said health claims on unhealthy foods could "lead consumers to purchase a product that they think is healthier than one that isn't making similar claims, when in actual fact it is not".

Health groups say ministers should have also applied the same criteria to nutrient claims, such as "high in fibre" or "sugar free", she said.

"Nutrient content claims also influence consumer preferences. And they really only tell part of the story. A breakfast cereal might talk about its added vitamins and minerals, but what it is not telling you is that it is a poor source of fibre or contains a lot of added sugar," she said.

If everyone read and understood the nutrition information panel and the list of ingredients, they'd get the "truth behind the hype on the front of the pack", Ms Hughes said. "Unfortunately, not

everyone has the time or the eyesight to review the info on the back of the pack.'

While the Australian Food and Grocery Council has some concerns about the new criteria, its deputy chief executive, Geoffrey Annison, said: 'we recognise that there needs to be a way to identify foods that are more appropriate for some people'.

The problem was that it was difficult to fit all food into a one-size-fits-all model, he said. That was reflected in the inability of authorities around the world and within Australia to agree on a way of measuring if a food was healthy or not.

For example, school canteens used a different measure to the one used by the Heart Foundation. And the government's model was different from the one used in Europe.

Despite these differences, Dr Annison said his organisation was committed to the government's consultative process.

Mark Lawrence, an associate professor of public health nutrition at Deakin University, said general health claims were about supporting the marketing of highly processed foods and less about promoting public health.

'You've got a contradiction, from the public health perspective, in that the marketers of the very products that the population is consuming too much of are being given yet more control to misrepresent food and health information - there is no independent approval process for their use and no evidence that the claims will be monitored,' he said.

The government had been bowing to lobbying from the processed food industry and allowing it to set the agenda when it came to health claims, Associate Professor Lawrence said. The new criteria will be introduced within two to three years as part of food-labelling reforms.

Read more: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/health/food-firms-forced-to-face-scorecard-over-health-claims-20120824-24roj.html#ixzz25fC8xyjf>