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Health bars in ratings 'game'
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Health bars in ratings 'game'

Taylor Penny

Most popular protein bars sold in supermarkets with Health Star Ratings are scored four or higher – but experts warn Australia's nutrition labelling system is being "gamed".

An analysis of products available at Woolworths, Aldi and Coles has found 29 of 37 of the protein bars produced by companies that chose to participate in the labelling system received a rating of four stars or higher out of a possible five.

However, Victor Chang Cardiac Research Institute chief executive Jason Kovacic said that most were highly processed and ultra-processed foods were linked to obesity, type 2 diabetes and some types of cancer.

"People think because something's got a five-star rating, it's really great and we can eat lots of it," he said.

"But it's still an ultra-processed food and is not healthy."

Protein bars have skyrocketed in popularity over the past 10 years, marketed as a way to fuel a lean, muscle-bound body.

But Deakin University ecological nutrition professor Mark Lawrence said the ratings system could be "gamed".

"Manufacturers use chemical ingredients to replace sugars and fats ... to avoid having their score reduced," he said.

"The ratings don't consider if the food is ultra-processed – it just uses a crude algorithm."

Bond University marketing professor Belinda Barton said the ratings were only useful when comparing foods within the same category, not, for example, a protein bar and milk.

"Consumers trust that a five-star rating on one product means the same thing on another but it doesn't," she said.

A Department of Health spokesman said the system did not class foods as "healthy" or "unhealthy" and was only intended for comparing similar products.

"It does not take into account other real, claimed, or perceived health effects of ingredients, additives, processing methods or levels of processing," he conceded.


Mark Lawrence

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