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Four-star bars & grain of salt
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Four-star bars & grain of salt

Experts query grocery health ratings

Taylor Penny

Most popular protein bars sold in supermarkets with Health Star Ratings are scored four or higher, but experts have raised the alarm that Australia's nutrition labelling system is being "gamed".

An analysis of products available in Woolies, Aldi and Coles has found 29 of 37 – about 80 per cent – of the protein bars produced by companies that chose to participate in Australia's controversial nutrition labelling system received a rating of four stars or higher out of a possible five.

However, Victor Chang Cardiac Research Institute CEO Jason Kovacic said most protein bars were highly processed and not healthy.

He said ultra-processed foods were linked to obesity, type-2 diabetes and maybe even 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," Professor Kovacic said. "But it's still an ultra-processed food and is not healthy."

In this week of Shopping Swaps we compared the nutrition and ingredients in 82 protein bars, 37 of which had the Health Star Ratings.

Protein bars have skyrocketed in popularity over the last 10 years and are marketed heavily as a way to fuel a lean, musclebound body before or after a gym session.

And it's working – market intelligence company Euromonitor has forecast that the protein bar industry, now worth $315m in Australia, will reach $374m by 2030.

But Deakin University ecological nutrition professor Mark Lawrence said the Health Star Ratings system was misleading people into believing protein bars were a nutritious choice.

"The Health Star system can be 'gamed' by manufacturers because they use chemical ingredients to replace sugars and fats in their products to avoid having their score reduced," Professor Lawrence said. "The ratings don't consider if the food is ultra-processed ... it just uses a crude algorithm to calculate based on a handful of nutrients that may or may not be in that food."

"Manufacturers can also add protein ingredients and fibre powders to boost their ratings."

Bond University marketing professor Belinda Barton said the Health Star ratings were only useful when comparing foods within the same category, not when comparing foods against all foods (protein bar against milk, for example).

"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 taxpayer-funded Health Star rating system did not actually class foods as "healthy" or "unhealthy". He also defended the system, noting it was only intended for comparing similar products.

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