



MEDIA RELEASE

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Mandatory Health Star Ratings a must after 10 years of food industry inaction

Leading public health groups are calling for Health Star Ratings to be mandatory across all packaged food products, after an audit found almost two-thirds of items failed to display a rating a decade after the introduction of the voluntary scheme.

Research conducted by The George Institute for Global Health has revealed that just 36 per cent of intended supermarket items carried a Health Star Rating, which provides consumers with a simple five-star scale to support healthier purchasing decisions – well short of this year's 60 per cent target set by the federal government.

The George Institute also found that food companies continue to be highly selective about which products they chose to display the rating: recent peer-reviewed analysis of more than 21,000 products identified 61 per cent uptake among five-star rated products compared to 24 per cent of products with three or fewer stars.

Just 16 per cent of products that would have been rated a half star were labelled.

The new data comes as a major survey conducted by Cancer Council Victoria¹ revealed that 82 per cent of Australian adults agree that Health Star Ratings should be included on all packaged foods.

Food Ministers, who will meet this Friday to discuss industry progress under the voluntary scheme among other matters, recently pledged to make the labels mandatory unless the industry reaches 70 per cent compliance by 14 November 2025. The George Institute, health promotion foundation VicHealth and Food for Health Alliance support this move in the wake of the food industry's mass failure to comply with voluntary targets.

Lead of the Food Governance Program at The George Institute, Dr Alexandra Jones, said uptake of Health Star Ratings had fallen compared to five years ago, meaning that targets were further out of reach than ever.

"It's been a decade since Health Star Ratings were introduced and five years since relatively low targets were set, yet most food companies are still not providing consumers

¹ Ilchenko E, Jinnette R, Morley B. Shape of Australia 2023 Survey: Final Report. Centre for Behavioural Research in Cancer, Cancer Council Victoria, February 2024. The survey was completed by more than 2,000 Australian adults aged 18-65 nationally.

with essential information that helps them quickly and easily understand the healthiness of what's available on our supermarket shelves," Dr Jones said.

"This puts to bed any illusions that food companies intend to lift their game, and we look forward to Food Ministers communicating a firm plan to make Health Star Ratings mandatory because final targets will inevitably not be met."

Health experts are also alarmed by the exceptionally low level of compliance among branded products that are often well-known and strongly marketed to shoppers – just 25 per cent of branded products feature Health Star Ratings compared to 80 per cent across supermarkets' own home brands.

VicHealth's Executive Manager, Health Promotion Systems, Michelle Murray said she was disappointed but not surprised by the latest data.

"We know that the big commercial food entities are exploiting the Health Star Rating System and using it as a marketing tool rather than to help consumers make more informed, healthier choices," Ms Murray said.

"This is evidenced by the fact that companies pick and choose which product categories they label – putting Health Star Ratings on their healthier products and avoiding displaying it on things like ice cream and kids' snack bars that would get a low score.

"These companies clearly have no chance – and no intention – of meeting their targets, which is why VicHealth supports government taking steps to make Health Star Ratings mandatory to protect the health of Australian families."

Food for Health Alliance Executive Manager Jane Martin said Australians deserved clear, transparent labels on the foods they purchased for themselves and their families.

"The recent national survey by Cancer Council Victoria confirms that Australians overwhelmingly support action that ensures Health Stars are displayed on all packaged foods, not just products that are cherry picked by industry," Ms Martin said.

"With two in three Australian adults currently above a healthy weight, government must make it as easy as possible for Australians to assess and compare packaged products at the supermarket, empowering them to shop healthier options.

"Mandatory ratings will hold big food companies to account and encourage them to produce more nutritionally sound foods, which will only benefit Australians' health in the long run."

Introduced in 2014, the Health Star Rating system was designed to be a simple, front-of-pack labelling initiative to help consumers cut through marketing spiels and compare the healthiness of products within categories. Ratings range from half a star to five stars, with five stars indicating the healthiest options.

However, industry compliance has declined from 40 per cent in 2019 – when Food Ministers agreed to set uptake targets – and has failed to rise above 36 per cent since.

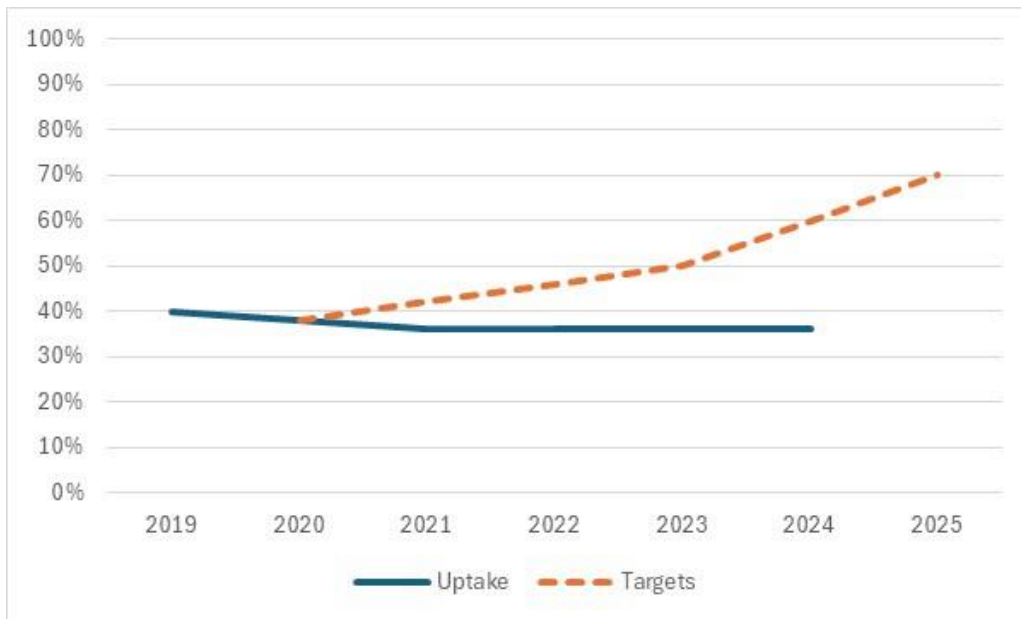


Fig 1: Health Star Ratings uptake by food manufacturers versus federal government targets (data was not collected in 2020). Source: The George Institute for Global Health, November 2024