

Shoppers Now Can Reach for The Stars

By Sally Squires

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Like many mothers, Deborah Deatrack is often short on time, which makes it especially challenging to choose nutritious foods for her family.

So Deatrack recently described being intrigued to find some new "guiding stars" on the crowded cereal shelves at a Hannaford Bros. grocery in Portland, Me. As she wheeled her cart down the aisle, she noticed that both the raisin bran she normally buys and the Quaker Oat Squares favored by her 8-year-old son had small icons with stars beneath them on the shelves, directing consumers to the best nutritional choices. The raisin bran had one star, the squares two.

That surprised Deatrack, who decided to buy the Quaker item -- with the higher nutritional rating -- and not the raisin bran.

"You want to make the most healthful choices," said Deatrack, vice president of community health at MaineHealth, a nonprofit health care system. "What the guidance stars do is help parents make choices right there in the supermarket aisle. . . . It's that kind of nutrition education over time that will really help people to be better shoppers."

At least that's the hope of Hannaford, a 158-store chain in New England and parts of New York. This week, the company plans to unveil the full Guiding Stars program, which it calls "nutritious shopping made simple."

While Guiding Stars appears to be the most comprehensive nutritional guidance program for consumers, it's not the first: In March, Harris Teeter, a chain with stores in the Washington area, introduced "yourwellness," a program that highlights the nutritional content of its store brands on 21 measures, from calcium and fat to sodium.

The Hannaford program goes many steps farther, scoring 27,000 items. (Bottled water, baby food, coffee and tea and oils are not included in the program.)

The 123-year-old company, owned by the Delhaize Group in Belgium, began the Guiding Stars effort after market research showed that "customers want to eat better but are confused by the volume and

complexity of nutrition information," said Hannaford spokeswoman Caren Epstein. Eighty-four percent of those polled said they would use a rating system to help buy more-nutritious products.

To meet the challenge of rating thousands of products, the company hired a team of nutrition scientists from Tufts University, Dartmouth Medical School, the University of North Carolina, the University of California, Davis, and Harvard University.

The team drew on nutrition guidelines developed by the U.S. government, the World Health Organization, the National Academy of Sciences and such private groups as the American Heart Association, the American Diabetes Association and the American Dietetics Association.

The scientists then developed a mathematical formula that scores food and beverages on their positive attributes (vitamins and minerals, fiber and whole grains) as well as their less-healthy ingredients (trans fatty acids, saturated fat, cholesterol, added sodium and added sugars). To account for varying portion sizes, they made calculations based on a 100-calorie serving of each product. The price of the products was not factored into the equation.

The team also took into account less-than-healthy foods and beverages that are fortified with added vitamins, minerals or fiber to help overcome their nutritional shortcomings. "We didn't give points for over-fortifying," said Jeffrey Blumberg, a professor of nutrition at Tufts and a member of the scientific team.

To keep the system simple for consumers, products were awarded one star (good nutritional value), two stars (better nutritional value) or three (best nutritional value) stars. Nearly 80 percent of the 27,000 products reviewed earned no stars for nutritional value.

The clear winners: fresh fruit and vegetables. "One hundred percent received three stars," Blumberg says.

Other high scorers included pasta (88 percent of the products reviewed earned stars), cereals (55 percent) and seafood -- 43 percent of those items snagged at least one star, and salmon earned three.

By comparison, the high sodium content of canned soup meant that just 12 percent of the rated items earned one star or more. About a quarter of meat products got at least a single star; boneless, skinless chicken breasts won three.

Soft drinks received no stars. Bakery products also didn't fare well: Just 7 percent earned even a single star. Cookies, cakes and pies had too much added fat and sugar and not enough fiber. Bread often scored too high on sodium to earn any stars.

In the dairy case, skim milk earned three stars, whole milk got none (because of its fat content) while 1 percent milk snagged two stars. Nonfat, plain yogurt also earned three stars, but most other yogurt received none because of too much added sugar. Eggs went unstarred, although egg substitutes, which are low in cholesterol, often earned a star or more. Margarine was not rated, but it may be assessed in the second phase of the program. Butter earned no stars.

But just as heavenly stars once helped mariners safely ply the seas, Hannaford's Guiding Stars are meant as a tool, not as a chart for the grocery store.

"We hope that people will use the stars to read the food labels," Blumberg said, noting that "it would be possible to pick [only] products that have three stars but still not have a balanced diet." The point, he noted, "is to help navigate the aisle that you are in."

And maybe also, Blumberg said, to help prompt food companies "to reformulate products to earn more stars. That's the underlying hope."