

ONQI Food Rating System

Reducing Customer Confusion or Adding to it?



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Consumer surveys have found that around 65% of Americans report reading the Nutrition Facts Panels on food labels – but that we're still confused about how to interpret the information (*International Food Information Council Foundation [IFIC] 2007 Food & Health Survey*). Add to the confusion the logos and criteria for 'healthier' choices created by food companies such as Kraft ('*Sensible Solutions*') and PepsiCo ('*Smart Spot*') – no wonder the task of healthful shopping has gotten so complex!

To combat customer confusion about complicated nutrition information on food labels, several groups are working to develop *food rating systems*. Dr. David L. Katz, director of the Yale-Griffin Prevention Research Center, recently unveiled the Overall Nutritional Quality Index (ONQI) – a food rating system that



ONQI is a food rating system designed to simplify the task of food shopping. Critics worry that the system will only add to consumer confusion about healthy food choices.

assigns each food product a number ranging from 1 to 100, with 100 being the healthiest. Ratings are based upon a complex assessment of approximately 30 nutrients, both those with favorable health effects such as fiber, and those with unfavorable health effects such as added sugar.

But Dr. Katz is not alone in the development of food ratings systems. The Hannaford Brothers Company, a Maine grocery chain, launched a "Guiding Stars" rating system – assigning foods zero to three stars, with three being the healthiest. After a year of tracking, Hannaford reports that higher-rated packaged goods are selling more quickly. They, too, are promoting their rating system and would like to expand it into more grocery chains around the country. A University of Washington researcher also plans to make public a food scoring system that could be translated into numerical scores or letter grades.

Critics worry that food rating systems will add to shopper confusion. For example, a food product in a Hannaford store was given zero stars (based on the "Guiding Stars" rating system), and also had the American Heart Association logo on it. How is a consumer to interpret mixed messages such as these? Consumer advocates insist the real solution is for the federal government to step in and require that one food rating system becomes a national standard.

The ONQI system is scheduled to appear in select grocery stores starting in the Summer of 2008, and developers plan to expand applications to restaurants, print materials (e.g., books, periodicals), and on-line (www.ONQI.com).

For more information about the ONQI system:

Q&A: <http://www.griffinhealth.org/Research/ONQIpages/FAQs.aspx>

New York Times article: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/01/business/01food.html?ref=fitnessandnutrition>

USA TODAY article: <http://blogs.usatoday.com/oped/2007/12/grocery-cheat-s.html>

Links to other articles about ONQI: <http://www.griffinhealth.org/Research/ONQIpages/Media%20Coverage.aspx>