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Use of nutrition content and health claims on ready meal foods in the Australian food supply

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Claims relating to foods' nutrition content and potential health benefits have been shown to influence consumer preferences and purchases regardless of the nutritional quality of the product⁽¹⁾. In Australia, permitted claims include nutrition content claims, which refer to the presence or absence of a nutrient, and health claims, which refer to health benefits of foods or nutrients in a product. Health claims include general level health claims, which refer to normal processes and functions, and high level health claims, which refer to a disease or biomarker of a disease. Products that display a health claim must meet the Nutrient Profiling Scoring Criterion (NPSC), however this is not required for products to make a nutrition content claim. The aim of this study was to examine the use of nutrition content and health claims made on Australian ready meal products and assess the proportion of products displaying claims that meet the NPSC. Analysis of the ready meal category in the 2023 FoodSwitch database, a repository of Australian food packaging images and label data for over 28,000 foods developed by The George Institute for Global Health, was conducted^(2,3). Foods in the ready meal category were identified and data from the nutrition information panel was collated to calculate whether they met the NPSC. Nutrition content and health claims were extracted from product images and categorised according to claim type (nutrition or health claim) and claimed nutrient or attribute. The proportion of products meeting the NPSC was then calculated overall and by claim type (nutrition content vs health claims). Data were available for 777 ready meal products. Of these, 682 (87.8%) met the NPSC. In total, 2051 nutrition content or health claims were identified across the ready meal products, with 1909 (93.1%) of these categorised as nutrition content claims. The remaining 142 claims identified were general level health claims, with no high level health claims identified. Almost all (n = 1857, 97.3%) nutrition content claims and all general level health claims were made on products which met the NPSC. The most common claims related to protein, energy and fibre content. The use of claims was prevalent across the ready meal food category in Australia, with claims relating to nutrient content being most common. While most claims were made on products that met the NPSC, there is a need for further research to ensure the NPSC appropriately distinguishes between healthy and less healthy food products. This will ensure consumers are equipped to make informed decisions when purchasing food products.

References

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