



Five Nutri-Score myths busted

Nutri-Score helps consumers compare easily between foods and drinks. It is a front-of-pack nutritional label which converts the nutritional value of food and beverages (i.e. salt, sugar, fat content among others), into a simple overall score. It is based on a scale of 5 colours and letters: green 'A' represents the best nutritional quality, while dark orange 'E' shows the lowest. As some myths about Nutri-Score are spreading confusion, it's time we put the facts straight.



MYTH #1:

“With Nutri-Score, junk food scores healthy”

The examples of diet soda (which gets a 'B') and frozen French fries ('A') have extensively made the rounds, supposedly proving the flaws of Nutri-Score. But what's that all about?

For diet drinks, Nutri-Score reflects their low/zero sugar and calorie content. As such, it is logical that a diet soda scores better than the full sugar version – but never as good as water, the only drink classified as 'A'. Nutri-Score does not take into account sweeteners or other additives because, for now, science just doesn't allow us to do so. Consumers who want to avoid sweeteners and additives can watch out for 'E numbers' in the list of ingredients.



What about the fries then? Just like the nutritional table on the back-of-pack, Nutri-Score reflects the nutritional value of the food as sold – not as prepared. That is why frozen fries (nothing more than peeled and cut potatoes) get an 'A'. But of course, the nutritional value of fries has a lot to do with how you cook them (oven or fryer), the type of oil you use and whether you go easy or not on salt. That's why neither the nutritional table nor any front-of-pack label - such as Nutri-Score - can factor in these parameters.

MYTH #2:

“Nutri-Score classifies foods as good vs bad”

Nutri-Score is not about praising or demonising foods. It simply 'translates' the nutritional information - which is already on the back-of-pack - into a single score. It makes it easier for consumers to choose their food accordingly.

It should come as no surprise that some cured meat products and cheeses get a Nutri-Score 'D' or 'E' given their high salt and fat contents. The same goes for smoked salmon. Fresh oily fishes (e.g. salmon), on the other hand, score 'A' or 'B' – because they contain much less salt and fat as their smoked variants. This information is already part of the nutritional table on the back-of-pack – Nutri-Score simply converts the numbers into a more consumer-friendly label.

MYTH #3:

“Nutri-Score threatens the Mediterranean diet”

That's exactly the opposite! The *traditional* Mediterranean diet is high in fruit, nuts, vegetable, legumes and cereals, low in red and processed meats and dairy products, and has olive oil as a major source of fat.¹

¹ World Health Organization, 'Fostering healthier and more sustainable diets – learning from the Mediterranean and New Nordic experience', 2018.

This is all in line with Nutri-Score, which takes into account nutrients to limit (calories, saturated fat, sugars and salt) and those elements to favour (fibre, proteins, nuts, fruit and vegetables). With Nutri-Score, olive oil comes across as a source of good fat ('C') compared to butter ('E') or saturates-rich vegetable oils such as palm oil ('E').

With 1 in 2 European adults overweight or obese, including in some Mediterranean countries, the healthy food choice must be easier for consumers. Nutri-Score can play a big role in that respect, as it helps consumers compare easily the nutritional value of foods and to make healthier purchase choices.^{2,3} Nutri-Score, however, does not replace dietary recommendations for healthy eating, which remain the reference for what we should eat, how often, and in which proportions.

MYTH #4:

“Nutri-Score is flawed because it does not consider the amounts eaten”

To save consumers the time and the hassle to make complicated calculations to compare products, Nutri-Score is based on a uniform reference amount of 100g/ml rather than on portion sizes. Research has shown that Nutri-Score helps consumers to eat a smaller quantity of a product with a 'D' or 'E'.⁴

If Nutri-Score was portion-based, scores would be calculated on the amounts of sugar, salt, fruit, protein, etc. contained in a portion of product. A 15g portion of confectionery, mayonnaise or chocolate spread would artificially score better than they do per 100g/ml. But consumers risk eating more than the portion size stated on the package. Indeed, who eats only 30g cereals at breakfast?

MYTH #5:

“Diet Coke scores healthier than olive oil”

Would you consider using diet Coke to prepare a salad dressing? Probably not. That's why it is irrelevant to compare diet Coke (Nutri-Score 'B') to olive oil ('C').

Nutri-Score is helpful to make meaningful comparisons. For instance, it helps to compare various types of oils according to their saturated fat content (e.g. while butter, coconut and palm oils get an 'E', olive, walnut and rapeseed oils get a 'C').

Nutri-Score allows consumers to compare the nutritional value of foods for a given meal. For instance, for breakfast you may consider having bread, pastries, cereals or cookies. Also, you may then hesitate between various types of cereals (corn flakes, muesli, chocolate puffed rice) or different brands of muesli. Nutri-Score helps you find out which one is the healthier option.



Source: Hercberg, Serge et al. (2019)

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

Good does not mean perfect. That's why regular reviews of the scheme must allow for improvement, as scientific knowledge and the food market keep evolving. For instance, the Nutri-Score was updated in 2019 to better reflect dietary recommendations: the grade of olive oil shifted from 'D' to 'C', to match that of walnut and rapeseed oils.

A review of Nutri-Score is planned for 2021 and should involve scientists from the countries where it is rolled out. It is crucial this review is conducted free from commercial interests and political influence to prevent any weakening of Nutri-Score.

² Chantal Julia, Serge Hercberg, 'Development of a new front-of-pack nutrition label in France: the five-colour Nutri-Score', Public Health Panorama, Volume 3, Issue 4, December 2017.

³ Manon Egnell, Zenobia Talati, Serge Hercberg, Simone Pettigrew, and Chantal Julia, 'Objective Understanding of Front-of-Package Nutrition Labels: An International Comparative Experimental Study across 12 Countries'. Nutrients, 2018 Oct; 10(10): 1542

⁴ Egnell, M. et al. [Impact of Front-of-Pack Nutrition Labels on Portion Size Selection: An Experimental Study in a French Cohort](#). Nutrients 2018, 10, 1268.