



You can't judge a book by its cover, but can you judge food by its label? **Ruth Williams** investigates the marketing tactics used by big companies to woo you, the customer.



# 'Traffic light' nutrition guide has manufacturers seeing red

THEY boast they are crammed with "wholegrains", or are "lower" in fat, or contain no artificial colours or flavours. But if research by the Obesity Policy Coalition is any guide, these products may be less healthy than they appear.

The Obesity Policy Coalition, including the Cancer Council Victoria and Diabetes Australia's Victorian branch, has applied the much-debated "traffic light" food labelling system to some of Australia's most popular processed foods — illustrating their high sugar, fat or salt content.

It shows that Grain Waves, a "wholegrain" alternative to chips, would earn amber lights on sugar, saturated fat and salt content, and a red light for overall fat content of 20.8 grams per 100 grams — translating to 20.8 per cent fat in any portion. Uncle Tobys Yoghurt Topps would earn red lights for sugars and saturated fat, while Kellogg's Nutri-Grain would score a green light on its low fat content, but a red light for its sugar content.

"People want to know about the sugar, salt and fat content of foods, but it's often unclear on foods like these," said Jane Martin, senior policy adviser for the Obesity Policy Coalition. "It's easy for people to think these products are healthier than they are."

Traffic light labelling is supported by most public health experts, who say it is an easy way for consumers to judge the relat-

ive healthiness of different foods. But food companies and the food industry group, the Australian Food and Grocery Council, criticise the system as overly simplistic, saying it is easily misunderstood by consumers.

In late January, a federal government-commissioned review of food labelling — dubbed the Blewett review, after its chairman Neal Blewett — backed traffic light labelling, saying it had been "consistently" found to be "most effective" in helping consumers understand the relative healthiness of foods. It called for Australia to introduce the system on a voluntary basis. The government will release its response to the review in December.

In applying traffic lights to the Australian products, the Obesity Policy Coalition relied on a system developed by Britain's Food Standards Agency. Ms Martin said the system "cut through the marketing spin" of the food companies, and would help consumers make healthier choices.

But Kellogg's spokeswoman Rebecca Boustead said the system measured a much greater serving than a person would typically eat. "It's an unrealistic and unfair comparison," she said.

According to Kellogg's, an "average serving" of Nutri-Grain is 30 grams, which is about the same as one Uncle Tobys Muesli Bar. A single-serve packet of Grain Waves is 40 grams.

The Obesity Policy Coalition said the 100-gram measure was useful to consumers because it was easy to then work out the proportion of fat, sugar and salt in the product. But it said more work was needed on whether traffic lights based on 100-gram portions or standardised serving sizes would be more useful.

Kate Carnell, head of the Australian Food and Grocery Council, said "the problem with traffic lights is people interpret red as stop, or don't eat, and green as go, or eat as much as you like — neither is correct".

The Food and Grocery Council backs the Daily Intake Guide system, which sets out the amount of energy, fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt in a serve, and how much of a person's daily intake it comprises. Under the guide, displayed on about 4000 products in Australia, the portion size is set by the manufacturer.

A Deakin University trial of traffic light labelling found the system did not result in people buying healthier foods. But researchers said the trial was affected by the demographics of online shoppers — "typically highly educated, relatively wealthy females" — and its limited scope.

Nestle, which owns Uncle Tobys, declined to comment. Smith's Snackfood Company, makers of Grain Waves, did not return calls from *The Sunday Age*.



