

Bad education

Food companies serve up their own 'canteen approved' logos on unhealthy snacks, Rachel Clemons discovers

Preparing and packing a healthy school lunchbox for your child every day of the week can be hard work, particularly when you're in a rush to leave the house in the morning. As well as core items such as a sandwich and fruit, you need a variety of interesting snack options – preferably foods your kids will eat. Pre-packaged snacks can offer a practical and convenient solution, but when you're grocery shopping and trying to choose between products, it's not always obvious which snacks are healthy and which aren't.

A swathe of 'school canteen approved' and 'meets school canteen guidelines' claims and logos have found their way onto the packs of snacks sold in supermarkets. I Quit Sugar crusader Sarah Wilson initially alerted us to this issue, and since then we've come across 17 different labels, most making reference to the National Healthy School Canteens guidelines or at least one of the state-based canteen guidelines.

On the surface, these logos appear helpful – after all, if products have

Nutshell

- Healthy school canteen guidelines are being misused to market unhealthy snack foods in supermarkets.
- Most products bearing the made-up logos are processed foods with little or no nutritional value.

been approved for canteens, you'd assume they'd be a good option for the lunchbox. But on further investigation, we discovered that the food companies themselves created these 'certifications'. The logos predominantly appear on processed snacks with little or no nutritional value, but their presence is leading parents to believe these products are a healthier option for their children.

43% of the parents we surveyed believe products marked 'canteen approved' are healthier

Guidelines for canteens, not supermarkets

School canteen guidelines are designed to help canteen managers make healthier food and drink choices. The guidelines use traffic light criteria to classify foods as green (described as 'choose plenty', 'every day' and 'fill the menu', for example), amber ('select carefully') or red ('occasionally', 'not recommended').

But the 'canteen approved' logos we've seen in supermarkets are mostly being used to promote foods categorised as 'amber', a large proportion of which would be considered 'discretionary foods' under the Australian Dietary Guidelines. These include treats such as sweet biscuits, chips and other fatty or salty snack foods, which are surplus to requirements and should be limited in most people's diets.

The most recent National Nutrition Survey highlighted that over one third (35%) of total energy consumed is coming from discretionary foods, and for children aged 14–18 it was a massive 41%. So promoting these types of products as ‘approved’ or ‘meeting guidelines’ is irresponsible – particularly when one in four children in Australia is overweight or obese.

Sneaky servings

Often products fall shy of being classified as ‘red’ because of their small serve size. Jumpy’s potato snacks, for example, have a Health Star Rating (HSR) of just

two stars. But the product still meets the NSW canteen guidelines’ kilojoule, saturated fat and sodium criteria for an amber food because it’s a tiny 18g pack.

The logo on the little 25g Arnott’s Chocolate Tiny Teddy packs (also two stars) says the biscuits meet amber school canteen guidelines. The 200g box of the same product carries the logo too, but eat more than 13 biscuits and you’d be heading into red territory. Is it reasonable to expect consumers to know the logo only relates to a specific amount?

The South Australian canteen guidelines acknowledge that some foods best avoided might meet criteria due to their small serving size, and encourage schools to “avoid energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods, even if, on assessment, they do not fall into the red category (i.e. by change of package size).” But that caveat is missing in the supermarket setting.



Frequency of consumption

Another concern with these logos on supermarket products is the potential for them to encourage regular

Some foods best avoided might meet criteria due to their small serving size

BREAKING NEWS: Just as we went to print, Arnott’s announced that it would remove its self-made school canteen logo from its Tiny Teddy and Shapes packs by mid-next year. We welcome the news and encourage other companies to follow suit.

consumption. All of the existing school canteen guidelines use the words ‘select carefully’ when referring to foods in the amber category. As well as avoiding large serving sizes, this means reducing or limiting the number of amber foods on the menu and offering these foods ▶



PICK & MIX CANTEEN GUIDELINES

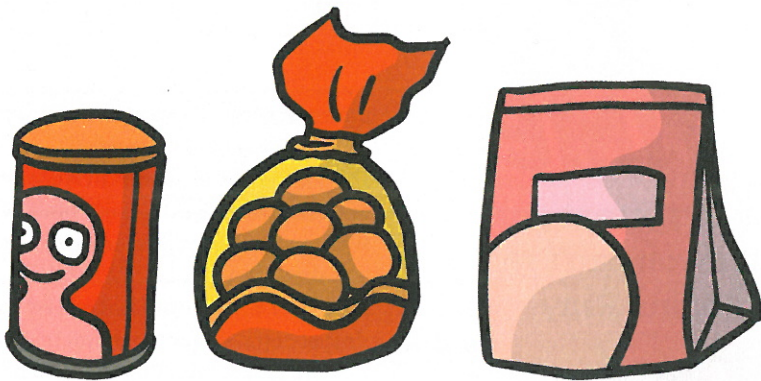
School canteen guidelines vary from state to state. In SA, for example, all soft drinks, artificially sweetened soft drinks, energy drinks, sports drinks, flavoured mineral waters, sports waters and fruit drinks are automatically classified as red and banned from sale in schools. In NSW, these types of drinks can be categorised as amber rather than red – as long as they meet criteria for kilojoules and sodium per serve.

The national guidelines have a limit of 2g saturated fat per serve of savoury snack foods and biscuits before they’d be classified as red, whereas state guidelines allow 3g per serve. And while all guidelines classify ‘confectionery’ as red, only the national guidelines define confectionery in detail as “all types: sold separately or added to products including; boiled lollies, carob, chocolate (including choc chips and chocolate-coated), chocolate spreads, cough lollies, 100s and 1000s, juice jellies, icing, liquorice, soft lollies, yoghurt/carob-coated”. Other guidelines are looser with definitions and don’t specify whether their red classification extends to products with confectionery added.



Food companies can use these inconsistencies to their advantage, cherry-picking the guidelines that favour their products.

PARENT COMPANY	BRANDS/PRODUCTS	HEALTH STAR RATING	CANTEEN GUIDELINE(S) ON LABEL
Aldi	 Belmont Biscuit Co Teddy Tots Hundreds & Thousands	2 ★★	Amber (National)
Arnott's	 Tiny Teddy Half Coated in Milk Chocolate, Tiny Teddy Chocolate Chip, Tiny Teddy Honey, Tiny Teddy Hundreds & Thousands	1.5 ★★	Amber (NSW, Qld, Vic)
	Tiny Teddy Chocolate, Tiny Teddy & Spotty Dog, Tiny Teddy & Moo	2 ★★	
	Shapes Barbecue, Shapes Pizza, Shapes Cheese and Bacon	2 ★★	
	Shapes Cheddar	1.5 ★★	
Devondale	 Smoothies Strawberry & Banana	4 ★★★★★	Green (Vic, NSW, Qld, WA, SA)
George Weston Foods	 Golden Pikelets, Golden Mini Pikelets	3.5 ★★★★★	Amber (NSW, Qld, Vic)
Kellogg's	 Coco Pops Chocolatey Liquid Breakfast, Nutri-Grain Breakfast Fuel	4 ★★★★★	Green (NSW, Vic, Qld, WA, SA)
Mamee	 Monster Rice Sticks (Vegetable and Cheese flavours)	2.5 ★★★	Amber (NSW, Qld, SA, Vic)
	Monster Noodle Snacks (BBQ and Chicken flavours)	2 ★★	
Paradise	 Uglies Choc Chip Bickies	1 ★	Amber (NSW, Qld, Vic)
PepsiCo	 Parker's Original Pretzel Snacks	2 ★★	Amber (NSW, Qld, Vic, SA)
Ricegrowers Limited	 SunRice Wholegrain Brown Rice Mini Bites (Original, Cheese, Salt & Vinegar, Chicken flavours)	3 ★★★★★	Amber (National)
Sakata	 Paws Pizza Supreme Rice Snacks	3.5 ★★★★★	Amber (NSW, Qld, Vic, SA)
Snack Brands Australia	 Jumpy's Crunchy Potato Snacks (Chicken flavour)	1 ★	Criteria not specified (NSW)
The Smith's Snackfood Company	 CoolPak Popcorn	3 ★★★★★	Amber (NSW, Qld, SA, Vic)
The Vege Chip Co	 Ajitas Vege Chips BBQ and Natural	2.5 ★★★	Criteria/guidelines not specified
	Ajitas Vege Chips Salt & Vinegar	2 ★★	
Unibic	 Gingerbread Babies	2.5 ★★★	Amber (National)
Unilever	 Streets Paddle Pop (Banana, Chocolate, Rainbow flavour multipacks; Chocolate/Strawberry Snack Size multipack); Streets Paddle Pop with Real Yoghurt (Mixed Berry, Tropical Snack Size multipacks)	3 ★★★★★	Amber (National)
Woolworths	 Select Little Families (Chocolate, Caramel Choc Chip multipacks)	2 ★★	Amber (National, NSW, SA, Qld, Vic)
Yoplait	 Go-gurt (Strawberry, Fruit Salad flavours)	3 ★★★★★	Green (NSW, Qld, SA, Tas, Vic, WA)



only on certain days of the week or limiting selling time. But when you see the label in the supermarket, you won't necessarily know this. A few products provide information about the criteria met or the meaning of 'amber' in small print on the back of the pack or even on a website, but most don't.

Our survey

To get an idea of how much influence these labels can have, we surveyed more than 1000 parents from a broad range of demographics across Australia, showing them a range of the 'canteen approved' logos that appear on supermarket products. We found that 43% believed that products with these logos are healthier than similar products without logos, and 42% would be more likely to choose a product with one of these logos than a similar product without the logo.

It's clear that the 'school canteen approved' claim creates a health halo over products that display it, and can be a powerful marketing tool for food companies.

Of the parents we surveyed, only 38% thought they needed to limit the amount of these foods that their child eats, and a third thought foods with these logos are suitable to be eaten every day. In fact, of those parents surveyed who've purchased products with these types of logos, 59% of them give them to their children two to four times per week or more.

Dr Kieron Rooney, nutritionist and

Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Health Sciences at University of Sydney, has been vocal in his criticism of how food companies are using canteen guidelines to market products.

"The placement of these logos on foods that are available every day is a misrepresentation of the guidelines," he told us. "The guidelines are specifically to inform

canteen managers on how to prepare their menus; that is, amber food products should be selected carefully and are not to dominate the menu. By placing these logos on foods available in supermarkets without the appropriate explanation on what they represent, the companies are encouraging everyday consumption of their amber products."

Not approved or regulated

According to our survey results, 43% of parents believe these logos have been approved by an independent authority or government body, and more than a third think that the use of these logos by food manufacturers is regulated. But this is not the case.

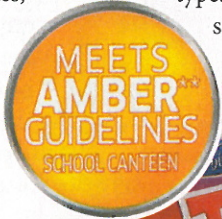
Food companies have created their own logos "to help consumers make

easier and more informed choices" in the words of Arnott's, but there's no authority that monitors their use or checks their self-awarded 'canteen approved' status against the guidelines.

CHOICE verdict

Self-made certifications referencing school canteen guidelines can give the impression that these products are a healthier choice for children and suitable for regular consumption. We think the use of these logos to market processed snacks of negligible nutritional value in supermarkets is both inappropriate and misleading. Join our campaign at choice.com.au/dodgylogos calling for food companies to remove these types of logos and claims from supermarket products. ■

43% of parents believe these logos have been approved by an independent authority





Jetting into debt

Australians are signing up to holiday deals on the back of loans that are interest-free for a limited time, supposedly allowing them to take that trip of a lifetime they otherwise couldn't afford.

But there's a big catch when the interest finally kicks in after nine months. At 20%, the interest rate is on par with high-interest credit cards, and will likely leave Australians who fall for the deal paying off their debt for years.

Holiday websites BYOjet.com, escapetravel, myholidaycentre.com.au and Cruise Megastore let you book packages including accommodation and flights without paying for the trip until you return.

At BYOjet.com.au the deal is available to travellers who earn just \$30,000 per year. The site's chief of sales and marketing, Maria Kirkpatrick, recently told *The Australian* that the offer was designed for those that can't afford to travel.

"This is their opportunity to take their family on that Disneyland, once-in-a-lifetime trip that they might not have been able to afford before."

But CHOICE spokesperson Tom Godfrey said the offer is a fast track to booking your own trip into crippling debt.

"You could jet into a world of financial pain. Don't go into debt to go on a holiday. Save up and take a break when you can afford it," Godfrey said.

Canstar figures show if customers took out a \$30,000 loan at 19.55% and then began making only the minimum monthly repayments, the loan would cost a total of \$71,000.

NATASHA PATCH

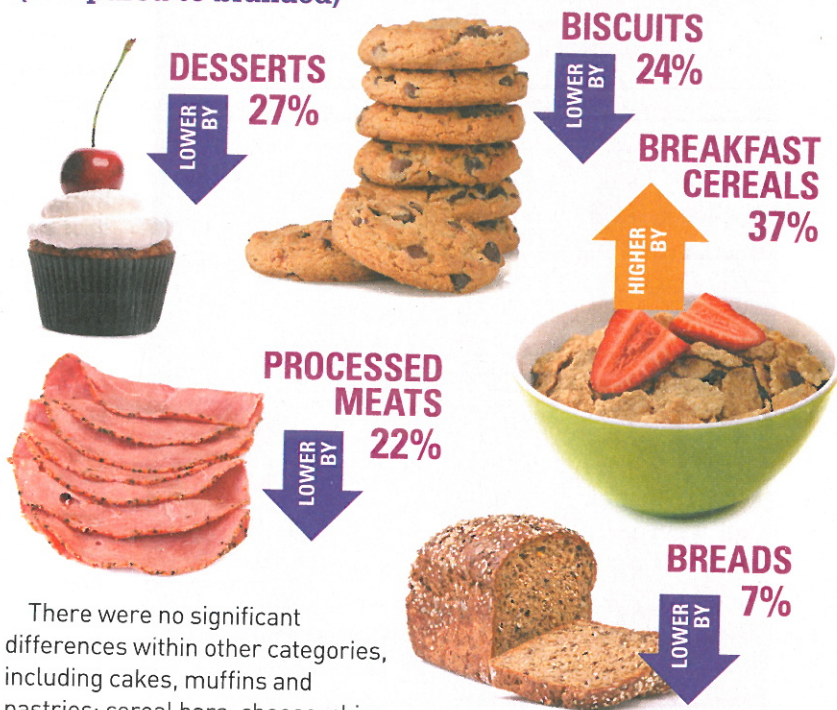
Salt reduced

If, like many Australians, you think big brand products are healthier than their supermarket own-brand equivalents, you could be in for a surprise – at least as far as salt is concerned.

Recent research by the George Institute for Global Health analysed the sodium content of 15,680 products across 15 food categories from 2011 to 2013, comparing branded products with supermarket own-brand or "private label" products.

Overall, salt content was lower in the private label products, and in 2013 (the most recent figures) it was 17% lower. The notable exception was breakfast cereal, where private label products were much higher in salt than branded products.

Salt content in private label products (compared to branded)



There were no significant differences within other categories, including cakes, muffins and pastries; cereal bars; cheese, chips and snacks; nuts and seeds; processed fish; ready meals; sauces; soup; and vegetables.

While three of the major supermarket chains – Coles, Woolworths and Aldi – made voluntary commitments to reduce sodium in some of their foods, Aldi was singled out for its "very encouraging reduction in mean sodium content across its private-label range". Conversely, IGA (Metcash) products had consistently higher sodium than other chains.

The authors note that Australians are eating an average of 9g of salt per day, more than double the suggested dietary target of 4g per day, with most of it coming from packaged processed foods. Sodium is implicated in 11% of deaths from ischemic heart disease and 15% of deaths from stroke.

The Institute's Professor Bruce Neal points out that the research didn't look at other nutrients, including sugar and fat, and warns consumers to judge food products on overall merits.

KARINA BRAY