Healthy snacks?

Which? research reveals the cereal bars that are high in sugar, fat, and calories, despite the manufacturers’ attempts to convince you they’re healthy. One even contained pork gelatine.

Cereal bars are often promoted as healthy snacks or an ideal breakfast, and many people choose them rather than, say, a chocolate bar, as they think they’re a healthier option. But Which?’s expert analysis of 30 bars from bestselling brands shows that few deserve this image.

All but one of the bars we looked at were high in sugar, and many were high in saturated fat. Poor labelling and confusing claims mean often this isn’t clear.

**HIGH IN SUGAR**

The 30 bars we looked at, 16 contained more than 20% sugar. While this came from fruit in some of the bars, all except the Naked Apple Pie bar contained added sugars.

And the manufacturers don’t make it easy for you to tell how much added sugar there is in each bar (see ‘Expert view’, opposite). By law, manufacturers have to list the ingredients in order of quantity. By having several different kinds of sugar, the names appear further down the list — allowing healthier ingredients, such as oats, to be higher up, and giving the impression that the bar is healthier than it really is.

The first ingredient in the Tracker Roasted Nut is glucose syrup (sugar). Per bar, the highest in sugar was the Nutri-Gran Elevenses with 15g — around 15% of your GDA. Although the Dorset Cereals Blackcurrant, Cherry, Raspberry bar contained a similar amount of sugar, at 15g, this included sugar from fruit, which offers additional nutritional benefits. But it’s worth remembering that sugar from fruit will still contribute the same amount of calories as added sugar.

**HIGH IN FAT**

Almost a third of this bar is fat. While some of this comes from peanuts and hazelnuts, the ingredients also contain vegetable fat and harmful hydrogenated fats.

**HIGH IN CALORIES**

This 45g bar contains 11g of sugar, almost four teaspoons. Although it contains raisins and apple puree, the main source of sugar is glucose-fructose syrup.

**HIDDEN FAT**

The Tracker Roasted Nut bar markets itself as containing ‘no artificial colours, flavours or preservatives’, but hydrogenated vegetable fat is listed in the ingredients. Hydrogenated fats are harmful in the same way saturated fats are — they raise cholesterol and can lead to heart disease.

Ten of the 30 were high (red) in saturated fat, six of these were aimed at children.

**CHILDREN’S BARS**

Seven of the bars we looked at were marketed to children. All were high (red) in sugar and two, Coco Pops Snack Bar and Monster Puffs Cereal and Milk Chocolate Bar, contained over 40% sugar — all added.

Several cereal bars, including the Monster Puffs Cereal and Milk Chocolate Bar and Hewish Chewee Milk Choc Chip, promoted the fact that they had ‘no artificial colours’ and were ‘great for your lunchbox’. They didn’t promote the fact that they contain between one and two teaspoons of sugar per bar — one teaspoon is around 5g of sugar. The labelling on the children’s bars was sometimes confusing. The Kellogg’s children’s bars had adult GDA information, not children’s. We have raised this with Kellogg’s.

Rice Krispies Squares contain pork gelatine, which makes these cereal bars unsuitable for vegetarians and people who don’t eat pork. But it wasn’t clearly labelled on the packaging – we found it buried in the ingredients as part of the marshmallows.

**OUR RESEARCH**

We looked at bars on supermarket shelves and chose 30 bars, bakes and breakfast biscuits from the top-selling brands, including those aimed at children. We focused on fruit and nut varieties and were ‘great for your lunchbox’. They didn’t promote the fact that they contain between one and two teaspoons of sugar per bar — one teaspoon is around 5g of sugar. The labelling on the children’s bars was sometimes confusing. The Kellogg’s children’s bars had adult GDA information, not children’s. We have raised this with Kellogg’s.

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**EXPERT VIEW**

High sugar levels

Shelake Loth / Nutritionist and Which? food expert

None of the products we looked at had traffic light labelling on the front of the pack, so it was hard to compare the nutritional content. We applied our own traffic light ratings in the table, below.

It was surprising to see high levels of sugar in all the bars. In many cases fruit provides the overall sugar content. But anyone buying a bar can only use the ingredient list to help them decide exactly how much of the sugar is added, which is probably why we found that sugar appeared in 18 different guises – glucose syrup; honey; golden syrup; rapeseed syrup; inverted sugar syrup; glucose syrup; maltodextrins; glucose-fructose syrup; barley malt syrup; dried glucose syrup; partially inverted sugar syrup; fruit concentrate; lactose; polydextrose syrup; glucose; grape juice concentrate; oligofructose syrup; dextrose; and sugar.

So keep an eye out for added sugar — regardless of what it’s called, it’s all sugar and provides the same number of calories gram for gram (4 kcal). And if you’re looking for a healthy snack, it’s best to avoid bars with chocolate or yogurt toppings, which will add to the sugar content.