

ONQ

A Food Ranking

“It turns out you can compare apples to oranges and oranges win, though apples are also very good for you.”

So said Dr. David Katz, a medical doctor, director of the Yale University/Griffin Hospital Prevention Research Center and chief architect of the Overall Nutrition Quality Index (ONQI). “From altitude, the system is quite simple,” he said. “We have taken 30 different nutrients – some good for you and some not – weighted each of these factors and ranked food (on a scale of 1 to 100) according to how much nutrition is in each item.”

Dr. Katz said that intuitively we know that broccoli is better than marshmallows and spinach is better than cheese doodles. What he and esteemed panel of 12 other scientists did was create an extremely complicated formula that can take the ingredient list of any item and create a score to do what the human mind does intuitively when faced with the aforementioned choices. He said the panel developed the list of 30 nutrients and then weighted them according to the positive or negative effect that each nutrient has on health. Obviously sugar and fat are a negative influence while vitamins and fiber receive a positive weighting. The algorithm actually produced a score that ranged between .0001 and 8,000. To make the rating system usable, Dr. Katz said the scoring system was compressed to a 100 point scale. “We didn’t do it proportionately because it wouldn’t have allowed for a distinction where it makes the most sense,” he said.

The group determined that every item that received a score above a certain level received the top score, and then the scale went down from there. So on the ONQI scale, mustard greens, spinach and strawberries each received a score of 100. Using the formula, each item no doubt had a different score but they are all at the top of the food chain nutritionally. It is basically a scoring system based on the curve. Katz further explained that the range for fruits and vegetables in the algorithm went from around 3,000 to 8,000. If a truly proportionate rating system was used there

would have been very few items from 10-100, with almost all the other items in the 0-10 category. “It made sense to put the range where it is most important,” he said.

Hence Dr. Katz said the difference between any two scores is significant. If one is looking at breakfast bars for example and one bar scores a 25 and the other scores a 27, that is worth noting with the higher scoring bar definitely delivering a greater nutritional punch for the consumer. Obviously as the gap widens the nutritional significance increases.

The Yale researcher is passionate about the ONQI system because he is absolutely convinced that it will help consumers make better choices and will also convince food manufacturers to create products that get a higher nutritional score.

To disseminate this information, Yale-Griffin is working with Topco Associates, Skokie, Ill., on an August 2008 release. Katz explained that they are working at the retail end of the spectrum because retailers are in the business to sell food not a specific food. If consumers shifts their buying habits to higher ranked foods that may hurt a specific food manufacturer but should not negatively impact a retailer. Topco represents 62 regional members so Katz expects the August roll out to include thousands of stores across the country. “Other retailers are also interested in adopting the system so we are currently working with Topco to see if they want an exclusive or how long they want exclusivity.”

Topco and Yale-Griffin, as well as the ONQI company that is in the process of being formed, are currently scoring more than 50,000 grocery store food items so that the roll out will include most foods in a grocery store. Katz said that after this initial work all new food will be scored as it is developed and brought to market.

Brian Josephs, vice president of produce and floral for Topco Associates LLC, believes the new ranking system will prove to be a boost for the produce industry. “We all know vegetables and fruits



System That Works

By Tim Linden

are good for you. However, I think people will be surprised at just how good they are and how well they rate on the ONQI scale. As the produce offering continues to expand to offer consumers more value-added products, ONQI scores will highlight the benefits of these products and help consumers make good choices.”

The Yale researcher said that there has also been interest from food manufacturers. Developers of highly nutritious items are of course interested in having a ranking system that gives a higher score for their low fat cereals, fruit bars and granola bars than their competitors. But Katz said even manufacturers of high calorie/low nutrient comfort food are interested in improving their ingredient list to get a better score. “If a manufacturer is making a candy bar that scores a two and they want to work with us and change their ingredients to get a four, that’s great.”

Katz agrees that the rating system will give a big boost to foods that naturally score high such as fruits and vegetables. Intuitively people already know that fruits and vegetables are good for them but seeing a score in the 90s on virtually every fruit and vegetable item will send a positive message as a consumer shops a produce department.

Katz said the system does cut across food categories so you can compare an apple and an orange and more importantly a bunch of grapes to a bag of potato chips. But he thinks the system will be used mostly by consumers comparing items in the same category. A mom shopping the cereal item can look at two cereals and see that one gets a score of 15 and another scores a 40. That is a powerful marketing message. He said that the system will hopefully convince manufacturers that what is in the box of cereal is more important than the marketing tools that they are using on the carton such as cartoon characters or words that have lost their meaning such as “light”.

One surprising finding, according to Katz, is that often reformulated items with less sugar, were actually less nutritious than the regular items. He revealed that when the system scored “light” mayonnaise, for example, it had a lower score than regular mayonnaise. “We thought we had discovered a flaw in the formula. But then we looked at the ingredients (of both the light and the regular mayonnaise) and saw that while the manufacturers took out some sugar, they added other ingredients including salt and oils that lowered the nutritional impact. The ONQI system was validated.”

Katz said it is in this type of content manipulation that the ONQI system will do its best work. “A mom shopping the cereal aisle and picking an item with one-third less sugar is doing so to make a more nutritious choice for her children. If that product is actually less nutritious, that’s just wrong.”

Katz said variety is the spice of life and is also important in the diet so the idea is not to create a system causing people to only eat items that score 100. “Most people are going to get it and use this correctly, but we know there will be people out there who won’t. We are taking that into account when we launch ONQI.”

He said the researchers worry about someone who uses the scoring system and decides that eating 20 items that have a score of 5 equals eating a bag of spinach with a score of 100. “We know there are people like that out there.”

In addition, he said one needs to look at the food consumed in relation to their entire diet. A particular item may score low because it is very high in salt. If that is the major source of sodium for a specific consumer that day, the item may be very good for his or her diet. The ONQI board is currently working on scoring an entire diet in which variety will play a key role. A person eating only spinach would score lower than a person eating items from all the food groups. ☺

