FoodSwitch FAQs

Packaged foods can often be too high in salt, fat, sugar and energy. FoodSwitch can help you find out what's in the food you're eating, so you can make simple switches to healthier choices when you're doing your shopping.

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About FoodSwitch

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What is FoodSwitch?

FoodSwitch helps you get immediate, easy-to-understand information about packaged food products as well as a list of similar foods that are healthier choices. You can do this by scanning the barcode using your smartphone camera.

Each product you see in FoodSwitch has been rated using a colour-coded 'traffic-light' labelling system. It's easy to see at a glance how healthy a food is based on nutrients like fat, sugar, salt and energy. The process for recommending alternatives also takes into account other important food components such as protein, fibre and, for some products, calcium.

You can then share this information and your healthier shopping lists with your friends and family.

Why did CCmHI conduct research on FoodSwitch and bring it to China?

FoodSwitch was designed by The George Institute for Global Health to support healthier food choices and prevent diet-related ill health. It is already available and popular in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. The goal is to empower individuals to make healthier food choices by providing access to information and innovative tools.

Although there are policies and regulations about food labelling in China, current food labels can be difficult to understand and there is an urgent need for simplification. FoodSwitch is a key step toward helping consumers make healthier food choices – starting in the supermarket aisle!

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Understanding how FoodSwitch works

How do I understand the results?

Each product you see in FoodSwitch has been rated for the level of total fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt. The 'traffic light' ratings tell you if a product is low (green), medium (amber) or high (red) in these food components.

What are the traffic light criteria?

The colours of the traffic lights for total fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt are based on the UK Department of Health's traffic light criteria for foods and beverages. Currently in China we don't have this kind of standard.

Energy does not currently have such criteria and so we represent it with a grey indicator in the app. However the energy content is taken into consideration along with other components such as protein and fibre when determining the order that the healthier choices appear in. In general try to choose products with a lower energy content.

If the nutrient value for a traffic light is missing the traffic light is displayed in grey with a "-".

How are healthier choices identified?

At present, the health rating system for packaged food hasn't been established in China. The app identifies healthier choices by comparing the overall nutritional value of foods based on the Australian Health Star Rating score algorithm. The overall score takes into account a range of different factors important to general health including fats, sugars, salt, energy, protein, dietary fibre, fruit vegetables nuts and legumes, and for some products, calcium.

Where does the nutritional information come from?

Wherever possible we use nutrient values reported by the manufacturer. If values are missing and we can make an estimate based on known values for other similar products we do that.

What if the product I scan isn't in the database?

If you scan a product that isn't in the database, you'll be invited to help us by taking three photos – one of the front of the product, one of the nutrition label and one of the ingredients list. The app will then automatically send these pictures to us so the item can be validated and added to the database.

Please note that with users contributing many new products to the database every day, it can take some time for the product to appear in the FoodSwitch app.

How can I be sure the information is correct?

The database is updated regularly by The George Institute's team of researchers along with the help of FoodSwitch users. It is possible that there will be some errors in the database and if you spot one please let us know. You can send in feedback about a particular product through the app, or by email at foodswitch.china@georgeinstitute.org.au. You'll receive alerts from time to time when the database is updated and/or a new version of the app becomes available.

Why doesn't the app include information about colours / preservatives / additives / GI?

At this stage FoodSwitch does not include information on colours, preservatives, additives, glycaemic index (GI) and glycaemic load (GL). However we are collecting additional information and future versions will aim to include more functionality.

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Technical questions

How do I access the FoodSwitch app?

For iPhone/iPad[1] users, you can download FoodSwitch from the App Store online on your device.

For Android[2] users, you can download FoodSwitch from Baidu Mobile Assistant, Android Market or 91 Mobile Assistant online via your device.

The app is free of charge. An internet connection (3G/4G or Wi-Fi) is required to download the app and to share information by social media and email. Standard usage charges may apply - check with your internet and mobile service providers for more information.

What devices does the FoodSwitch app work on?

FoodSwitch works on:

- Apple mobile devices that have a camera with auto-focus. Requires iOS 8.0 or later
- Android[2] devices running versions 4.3.x and above that have a camera with auto-focus.

Please note that if you're using a smartphone or tablet without a camera capable of auto-focus, FoodSwitch may not be compatible with this device. Without auto-focus, the pictures of the barcode will be blurry and FoodSwitch will be unable to identify the barcode.

Why isn't the app scanning the barcode?

If you're having trouble scanning with a compatible device, here are some tips that may help you scan more easily:

- Shake your phone to force the camera to auto-focus
- Try using in different light to avoid glare and shadows
- Check the autofocus capability of the camera. Try tapping on the screen at far and near objects to see if the focus changes
- Some users have also found it helpful to hold the object further away from the camera and make sure it doesn't fill the whole screen so that the autofocus can find the barcode.

If you're having trouble with an iPod:
- FoodSwitch is not compatible with iPod Touch (except the newest version with autofocus camera) as the iPod camera has lower resolution and does not auto-focus. This may result in blurry pictures of the barcode, and FoodSwitch will be unable to identify the barcode.

If you're asking about iPad Original:
- FoodSwitch cannot be used on iPad Original as it does not have a camera.

FoodSwitch is not compatible with Windows phones.

Is the app free? Will future updates also be free?

The app is free of charge and available to everyone. There are no plans to charge for FoodSwitch at present.

Can I use the app outside China?

FoodSwitch is designed specifically for each country and is different in each country in which it is released. This is because the bar codes on foods are specific to each country. If you use the chinese version of FoodSwitch outside of China it will likely give incorrect results. Currently, FoodSwitch is only available in versions for China, Australia, the UK and New Zealand. The FoodSwitch team is currently exploring opportunities to launch the app in other countries.

Where can I find more nutrition information?

You can contact The George Institute for Global Health at Peking University Health Science Center on foodswitch.china@georgeinstitute.org.au

Who do I contact if I have a question that hasn't been answered here?

You can give feedback or ask a question by email at foodswitch.china@georgeinstitute.org.au

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