

# Tuft's (Junk) Food Compass Is Worse Than We Thought

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✓ Fact Checked

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › The Food Compass, unveiled in 2021, claims to be a science-based tool to rank the healthfulness of foods, but actually promotes ultraprocessed junk
- › Its lead author, Dariush Mozaffarian, dean of the Tufts Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, has close ties to the Rockefeller Foundation and the World Economic Forum (WEF), while Tufts receives funding from junk food corporations
- › Independent journalist Nina Teicholz has illustrated the shortcomings in the Food Compass, showing how even potato chips, corn chips and Reese's Peanut Butter Cups score higher than eggs, cheese and ground beef
- › A critique of the Food Compass proposed that its algorithm produces "results that fail to discriminate for common shortfall nutrients, exaggerate the risks associated with animal-source foods, and underestimate the risks associated with ultraprocessed foods"
- › The Food Compass' emphasis on ultraprocessed junk continues with a clear favor for fake food over real food

The Food Compass, unveiled in 2021 by the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, appears to be a propaganda tool in disguise. While it claims to be a science-based tool to rank the healthfulness of foods, it actually promotes ultraprocessed junk — to an extent that's even worse than previously recognized.

Billed as an updated, more accurate food pyramid, it ranks more than 8,000 foods on a scale of 1 to 100, with 1 being the worst and 100 the best. The problem is Food

Compass' algorithms encourage consumption of ultraprocessed foods, while strongly discouraging consumption of all animal foods, including saturated animal fats.

## What Is the Food Compass?

If you haven't heard of the Food Compass yet, it's technically defined as a "new, science-based food rating system that aims to provide consumers, policy makers, retailers, food manufacturers and health care a tool to help determine the general healthfulness of different foods, beverages, mixed meals and restaurant meals."<sup>1</sup>

Foods that score between 100 and 70 are "encouraged," those scoring 69 to 31 should be "eaten moderately," and those scoring between 30 and 1 should be "minimized."<sup>2</sup> According to Tufts Now:<sup>3</sup>

*"It scores 54 different characteristics across nine domains representing different health-relevant aspects of foods, drinks, and mixed meals, providing for one of the most comprehensive nutrient profiling systems in the world.*

*The characteristics and domains were selected based on nutritional attributes linked to major chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular problems, and cancer, as well as to risk of undernutrition, especially for mothers, young children, and the elderly ... Potential uses of Food Compass include:*

- *Encouraging the food industry to develop healthier foods and reformulate the ingredients in popular processed foods and snacks;*
- *Providing food purchasing incentives for employees through worksite wellness, health care, and nutrition assistance programs;*
- *Supplying the science for local and national policies such as package labeling, taxation, warning labels, and restrictions on marketing to children;*
- *Enabling restaurants and school, business, and hospital cafeterias to present healthier food options;*

- *Informing agricultural trade policy; and*
- *Guiding institutional and individual investors on environmental, social, and corporate governance (ESG) investment decisions”*

Sounds good, right? Unfortunately, its primary purpose is to lead people away from wholesome natural foods toward processed junk foods. This isn't surprising considering its lead author, Dariush Mozaffarian, dean of the Tufts Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy (currently on leave), has close ties to the Rockefeller Foundation and the World Economic Forum (WEF), while Tufts receives funding from several junk food corporations.<sup>4</sup>

As such, the real motives behind Tufts' Food Compass are questionable, as is its science. A critique of the Food Compass, published in *The Journal of Nutrition*, proposed that its algorithm produces “results that fail to discriminate for common shortfall nutrients, exaggerate the risks associated with animal-source foods, and underestimate the risks associated with ultraprocessed foods.”<sup>5</sup>

## **Lucky Charms Healthier Than Eggs**

Independent journalist Nina Teicholz has illustrated the shortcomings in the Food Compass, reporting in July 2022 that the system ranks Lucky Charms as superior to whole eggs, ice cream with nuts as healthier than ground beef and Honey Nut Cheerios as better for you than an egg fried in butter.<sup>6</sup> At the time, she wrote:<sup>7</sup>

*“The Food Compass, which gives top ratings to Cheerios, Lucky Charms and Cocoa Puffs, is absurd on the face of it. In all, nearly **70 brand-named cereals** from General Mills, Kellogg's, and Post are ranked twice as high as eggs cooked in butter or a piece of plain, whole-wheat toast. Egg whites cooked in vegetable oils are also apparently more healthy than a whole, boiled egg, and nearly all foods are healthier than ground beef ...*

*What kind of dystopian world has nutrition 'science' entered into whereby a university, a peer-reviewed journal, and one of the field's most influential leaders*

*legitimize advice telling the public to eat more Lucky Charms and fewer eggs? Simply eyeballing these recommendations should be enough to know this diet is a get-sick, diabetes diet, a high-carb, sugar-laden, candy-coated highway to ill-health."*

After receiving some backlash, Mozaffarian acknowledged the Food Compass had some limitations. He told journalist Helena Bottemiller Evich of Food Fix that the intent was to create a "more holistic" system and he was accepting of "constructive criticism," like:<sup>8</sup>

*"Whole grain packaged foods, that are mostly whole grain but are still packaged and processed and have some added sugar, should those be scoring as highly as they do?' ... I think it's a valid point. We're looking at ways to see if we can scientifically improve the scoring. We do account for processing, but maybe we should account for it even more."*

Did Mozaffarian turn over a new leaf? Has the Food Compass been bashed unfairly? Teicholz decided to give the system "another look," she said, "and here's what I found: the Food Compass is even worse than I'd thought."<sup>9</sup>

## **53 Cereals, M&Ms 'Healthier' Than Eggs, Cheese and Milk**

Teicholz created updated charts using data from the Food Compass, tweeting, "53 General Mills cereals all healthier than cheddar cheese, milk, egg cooked in butter Including: Dora the Explorer, Berry Burst Cheerios, Count Chocula, Lucky Charms, Chex Chocolate."<sup>10</sup>



Tufts University food compass general mills cereals and selected other foods

In another example, even potato chips, corn chips and Reese's Peanut Butter Cups score higher than eggs, cheese and ground beef. Teicholz again tweeted her dismay:<sup>11</sup>

*"MnMs, Reese's Peanut Butter Cup, Triscuits >> cheese or eggs Lead author is Dean of Tufts Nutrition School, architect of White House Conf. on Nutrition &*

*Health We can't blame Americans for ill-health when this is our expert advice.  
Time to wake up."*

 Tufts University food compass junk food vs real food

## **Big Food Has Captured the World of Nutrition**

Based on the Food Compass, you'll be healthier if you replace whole egg, cheddar cheese and ground beef with literal candy, which is nothing short of insanity. Also based on this tool, government would be justified in restricting marketing of beef, egg and cheese to children, while schools could be encouraged to load M&Ms into school lunches. The whole thing is absurd and indefensible, but not unexpected. As Teicholz explained:<sup>12</sup>

*"In my view, the explanation is that the world of nutrition has become so enmeshed with corporate interests that experts don't even realize their 'expert views' are dangerously close to industry propaganda.*

*The growing encroachment of corporate influence in the field has been going on since 1941 at least, when General Foods, Quaker Oats, Heinz, the Corn Products Refining Corporation and other then-nascent food processing companies founded the 'Nutrition Foundation,' to funnel money into universities for nutrition research.*

*Now, the practice of food and pharmaceutical corporations influencing science, professional organizations, conferences etc. is completely normalized."*

For instance, a study by Teicholz and colleagues revealed major conflicts of interest among members of the U.S. 2020 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee (DGAC). DGAC is supposed to be an independent committee, which reviews scientific evidence and provides a report to help develop the next set of dietary guidelines for Americans.

The committee included 20 experts, 95% of whom had a conflict of interest with Big Food or Big Pharma. Certain players — namely Kellogg, Abbott, Kraft, Mead Johnson,

General Mills, Dannon and the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI) — were linked to multiple DGAC members.<sup>13</sup>

A Corporate Accountability report also found that more than half of those appointed to the 2020 DGAC had ties to ILSI,<sup>14</sup> which has been exposed as a shill for the junk food industry. Internal documents revealed ILSI embedded itself in public health panels across Europe and the United Nations in an effort to promote its own industry-focused agenda to raise profits at the expense of public health worldwide.<sup>15</sup>

The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (AND) is also more akin to an industry front group than a public health agency, with close ties to the manufacturers of some of the unhealthiest foods you can eat, including Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, General Mills and Kraft.<sup>16</sup>

Mozaffarian also works closely with Big Food and has partnered with General Mills to create tools to communicate with millennials. He's also been involved with Tufts' "FORCE" consortium, which promotes seed oils, and has personal ties with Barilla Pasta and a host of other companies, Teicholz notes.<sup>17</sup>

Tufts Friedman School of Nutrition's Food & Nutrition Innovation Institute also receives funding from dozens of companies, according to Teicholz, "including quite a few of those whose products get top ranks in the Compass. This includes Kellogg's, a Tufts Institute 'Gold Member,' which had 40 of its products included in the Food Compass."<sup>18</sup>

## **Fake Food Valued More Than Real Food**

The Food Compass' emphasis on ultraprocessed junk continues with a clear favor for fake food. "[T]he Compass values fake cheese over real cheese. Soy milk over real milk. Meatless chicken, even breaded and fried, over real chicken. And so on," Teicholz explains.<sup>19</sup> This is where Mozaffarian's ties to WEF become apparent.

Mozaffarian spoke at Davos in 2023 and was a cochair of a 2020 WEF food system summit. Further, according to Teicholz, "Two WEF employees, including a member of the WEF managing board and top media advisor, serve on the Tufts Friedman School Board of Advisors."<sup>20</sup>

According to WEF and other Great Reset proponents, a traditional whole food diet is unsustainable and environmentally destructive. Instead, they're pushing for a transition away from whole foods to a highly unnatural, ultraprocessed food diet based on cereals, oil, fake meat and fake dairy.<sup>21</sup>

Further, acknowledging that saturated animal fats are healthy, and that processed industrial seed oils and processed grains are not, would decimate the processed food industry, as it relies on cheap seed oils and grains. The healthy alternative is real food, and there's no big industry profits to be made from that. As Teicholz sums it up:<sup>22</sup>

*"I think most people don't realize that the haloed 'plant-based' diet promoted so assiduously by our ... nutrition schools means more fruits and vegetables, yes, but also replacing natural foods with ultra-processed fake foods and grains, as the Food Compass encapsulates so perfectly.*

*Recently, Mozaffarian lamented that the 'exaggerated controversy' over the Compass is 'dismaying,' and fears it 'can be weaponized by the food industry.' In the past, he's also spoken about the 'growing epidemic of fake news about nutrition.' But here we see our most credentialed experts evidently doling out industry-friendly fake news.*

*I don't want to say the solution is for people not to trust experts, but when they're recommending Frosted Mini-Wheats and Chocolate Cheerios, it's time for reasonable people to start looking elsewhere for healthy eating advice."*

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