

Supermarket stumpers: Playing the nutrition label game

Written by Kelly Bothum The News Journal
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Judging from the label, that box of cereal looks like a nutritional bonanza. Made with whole grains. Low-fat. With added protein. Enriched with vitamins and minerals.

Except for the fact that precious little of the heavily promoted whole grain is fiber and while lower in fat, it's higher in sugar. The protein might be a boost, but most Americans tend to eat more than enough protein anyway. And the enriched nutrients only make up for what was taken out during the processing.

So is it a dietary dream or disaster? The only way to find out is with a little nutritional sleuthing.

"The food manufacturers are perfectly happy to trick you," said Dr. Dana Simpler, a primary care physician at Mercy Medical Center in Baltimore, Md., who uses diet as part of the treatment plan for some patients. "If it looks like junk food, it is junk food. Don't be fooled by 'no fat' and think you're eating a health food."

It can be hard to navigate the myriad claims made on the nutrition labels, especially if you're trying to make better choices when it comes to reducing your intake of sugar, salt and calories. And of course, the best options are usually those that don't come from a box but rather the ground – especially fruits and vegetables.

But there are times in our busy day when packaged foods are the best, easiest or most available option. So how do you know which foods make the cut?

It's not always easy. A study published earlier this year in the Journal of Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics found that consumers often miscalculate the number of calories and nutritional content of products – like a snack-size bag of potato chips – that actually have multiple servings but are usually consumed all at once.

"We as consumers want to be able to look at something and get a quick answer. We don't want to think about it long," said Tracey Sinibaldi, a registered dietitian in Middletown. "The marketing piece, you need to look at what it is they're saying on the label. What's the intent of the target? You may see a pretty red heart, but you need to dig deeper because it might not be truly heart healthy if you have that add-on sugar and everything else."

The following tips can help make sense of those sometimes confusing nutrition labels and health claims:

1. Know how much you're eating.

One of the first places your eyes should land on a package is the serving size information, said Marianne Carter, a registered dietitian and director of the Delaware Center for Health Promotion at Delaware State University. Skipping this step makes it impossible to know how much you're actually consuming in the package.

"There are beverages out there that people drink all at once, but you look at the serving size and it says two. Every piece of information is about that one serving," Carter said.

That means if you blow past the serving size, you're likely to add calories, fat, sugar and sodium to your diet that you might not have been expecting, Simpler said.

"The serving sizes are nowhere near what most people would consider an actual serving size," she said. "You're tricked into thinking something has less sodium or fat than it really does."

To get a better idea of how a serving size stacks up with how much you actually eat, measure out the recommended size before you eat it. You might find you're eating more than one serving at a time.

2. Know the marketing labels.

There are plenty of ways food manufacturers can make us think we're eating more healthily than we actually are, Simpler said.

"I know there's lots of marketing tools in terms of 'natural,' 'organic,' and they put a hard play on the heart. They're making you feel like, 'This is really healthy for me,' vs. the item that doesn't have the word on it, said Sinibaldi, owner of TKS Nutrition.

Even the U.S. Food and Drug Administration acknowledges the term "natural" is hard to define because the processing that goes into food preparation often leaves it different than something grown in the ground. The agency doesn't have a definition for use of the term, but doesn't object as long as the food doesn't contain added color, artificial flavors or synthetic substances.

While the FDA doesn't have any regulations for the "organic" label, the U.S. Department of Agriculture does. It refers to foods that have been grown according to accepted farming standards, including the absence of herbicides and pesticides. On multi-ingredient products, the seal indicates the product is at least 95 percent organic. But that doesn't say anything about the nutritional value of the food, Sinibaldi said. "It won't be higher in fiber or minerals," she added.

3. 'Free' doesn't necessarily mean healthy.

It's the labeling trifecta: fat-free, sugar-free and cholesterol-free. But that doesn't mean that what's inside is better for you than the original version.

"If they are taking something out of the food, they have to add something back in. And likely, it's going to be sodium or sugar," said Arianne Missimer, a registered dietitian and owner of Core Fitness in Wilmington. "They are always playing tricks like that."

Sometimes people think they're making a smart swap by opting a lower-fat version of a food, such a peanut butter. But the fat in peanut butter, while high, is of the healthy variety, rather than saturated fat. In picking the lower-fat spread, you wind up with less fat, but more fillers and and sugar, Missimer said.

That's not to say you should avoid everything low-fat. Dairy products should be low-fat or fat-free, Missimer said. As for sugar-free options, take a look at what's being added to keep the sweetness – usually artificial sweeteners. Depending on the rest of your diet, moderation might be a better choice.

"It's very enticing," Missimer said. "If people really understand it a little bit more, it's easier to pick the right food."

4. Don't fall for deceptive claims.

Take the vegetable spray that advertises zero grams of fat. That might be true, but the serving size is a 1/4-second spray – barely enough time to get your finger off the trigger. For most of us, that spritz of spray might be three, four or more servings, which drastically changes the fat and caloric information.

Skewing serving sizes is just one way that manufacturers might skirt the truth. Other sneaky methods include labeling something as calorie-free if it contains fewer than five calories.

"If they can get below a certain threshold, they're allowed to call it zero," Simpler said. "Those are a couple ways they legally figured out how to mislead."

One way to figure out what's in a product is to look at the first few ingredients. The earlier in the list, the bigger proportion they are. But sometimes manufacturers will use more than one name for a sugar source so they don't have to put it as the first ingredient, Simpler said. Ingredients like maltodextrin, corn syrup, sugar, fructose and sucrose are different forms of sweeteners that, taken as a whole, might make up more of the ingredients than you realize.

"The louder the claim, the more unhealthy the item generally is," said Lisa Harkins, a registered dietitian in Lewes. "I love when potato chips or some snack food states 'a cholesterol-free food.' Well, duh. Only animal foods have

5. Know how much you should be eating.

The percentages that run down the right-hand column of the label is the percent daily value, and it's based on a 2,000-calorie diet. While some children, women and older people might not eat that much in a day – they might be logging about 1,500 calories, for example – the percentages can give consumers a good idea about the healthfulness of a food product.

For example, the nutrition label on a candy bar says it has 5 grams of saturated fat. According to the percent daily value, that's 25 percent of the day's allotment of saturated fat. If you still plan on eating the candy bar, be sure to balance the rest of your diet that day so you're not exceeding the daily recommended amount of saturated fat, which is 20 grams.

“I really do a lot of encouraging of using the percent daily value. This is a fast, simple way to make a quick decision,” Sinibaldi said. “It's not going to give you 100 percent of information, but you can start to narrow it down.”

If a product's serving constitutes more than 10 percent of the daily value for a particular category, take notice. While that's good for foods high in fiber, calcium, iron and vitamins A and C, it's bad for foods high in fat and sodium. And if you're not eating 2,000 calories a day, keep in mind the serving size and nutritional information might be higher or lower for you, depending on how many calories you're eating.

6. Look for fiber rather than whole grain.

Whole grain, multi-grain, enriched grain – what's the difference? That's the feeling of many shoppers as they read packages claiming good-for-you ingredients. Carter said customers should search out food that advertises itself to be “whole grain” or “100 percent whole wheat.”

Whole grains or foods made from them contain the essential parts and nutrients of the entire grain seed, according to the Whole Grains Council. They are different from grains that have been processed and stripped of nutrients.

While checking for whole grains in the ingredient list – they should be among the first listed – it's also important to note the number of fiber grams per serving, Harkins said. A good serving of whole grain products should have at least 3 grams of fiber.

Products that say they're made with cracked wheat, enriched flour or wheat flour might sound healthy, but they're whole-grain imposters.

And even the whole-grain label can be confusing. “Just because something has 20 grams of whole grain doesn't mean it's necessarily healthy,” Harkins said. “Grams of fiber is what you want to look for.”

Contact Kelly Bothum at 324-2962 or kbothum@delawareonline.com.