

From Ronda's Front Porch to Yours

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What is Behind a "Healthy" Food Label

On a typical day, 32 million American adults shop at a grocery store according to Time Use Institute. That is one out of every seven adults nationwide. The average time spent at the store not including travel time is 41 minutes. That is a considerable amount of time consumers are purchasing food for their families.

As you are going up and down the aisles of the store do you consider yourself a savvy shopper or are you like most other Americans hurriedly checking off your list so you can get to the next ballgame, meeting or engagement.

As hurried as life can be, we also want to make a conscience effort on filling our baskets with nutritious foods for our families that will provide the proper nutrition . Food packaging and marketing strategies can sometime mislead the consumer. Just because the label says "healthy" doesn't necessarily make it a good choice for your family.

The best options for healthy foods are those found around the perimeter of the store; fresh fruits and vegetables, dairy products and lean protein choices. However, when you venture off into the center isles of the store you might want to get in the habit of reading labels.

"When you're stuck in a situation where processed foods are the only thing available to you, it can be helpful to know which foods are healthier than others." says Dr. Walter Willett, chair of the department of nutrition at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

Labels that claim to be "healthy" or "natural" may not truly be accurate. In 2015 Dr. Willett was one of a dozen nutrition experts to notify the Food and Drug Administration that it's definition of "healthy" was out of date and could lead consumer in the wrong direction.

About a century ago, the major focus was diet and heart disease. Packaging with the label "healthy" meant it contained less than a specified amount of both sodium and fat per serving.

Since then, research has determined that diets rich in unsaturated fats, those found in nuts, seeds and fish, may actually reduce the risk cardiovascular disease and diabetes. Research has shown that eating a lot of refined carbohydrates may increase the risk of those conditions. The new 2015-2020 Dietary Recommendations for Americans limit only trans and saturated fats (to 10% of calories), added sugars (to 10% of calories) and sodium (to 2300 grams per day).

By July 26, 2018, most food packages will display an updated Nutrition Facts box that will include the amount of added sugars which are a source of empty calories. They will also include realistic serving sizes, and will no longer single out calories from fat.

As a consumer how can you tell if what you are buying is healthy and meets your nutritional needs? If the package says “healthy”, check the Nutrition Facts label on the back of the packaging and make sure you are not getting too many calories from sugars. Each gram of sugar has four calories.

Calculate how many servings you are eating and do the math. If a package has 2 servings and you eat the entire package, you must multiply the calories and nutrients by 2 to determine your calorie intake. This also includes sugars, fat and other nutrients. Also when looking at the nutrients listed remember that 5% of a nutrient means the food is low in that nutrient and 20% or more means the food contains a good amount of that nutrient.

So the next time you are cruising through the aisles to get groceries, take a few minutes to see if the packaging claims match the actual nutritional value of the product.

For questions or more information about food labeling and nutrition, contact the Scurry County Extension Office at 325-573-5423.

Sources: Harvard Health Publications, Harvard Medical School

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