

## Warning Food labels can make you fat, unhealthy and totally confused

When it comes to health claims, manufacturers can more than stretch the truth—and it's perfectly legal. Before you buy another box, bag or bottle of anything, check our guide to the seven biggest diet traps.

By Lawrence Goodman

Wouldn't it be nice if supermarkets were designed to make it easy to eat right? There would be clearly marked sections such as "super healthy," "OK if you don't overindulge" and "the food on these shelves just might kill you!" Food packaging would be simple, too. No more gobbledygook about trans fat or net carbs—just straightforward messages like "will make you live longer" on frozen vegetables and "the sugar in here will go straight to your butt" on candy.

Alas, that's not likely to happen any time soon. Instead, many manufacturers plaster their products with confusing, overblown and even borderline-bogus health claims, fooling us into consuming food and beverages with more fat, sugar and calories than we bargained for. The upshot? We don't understand why we're not healthy and slim—after all, we are *trying* to eat well.

It's not your fault. Understanding what's in the food you're eating wasn't supposed to be this complicated. When Congress passed the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act in 1990, it empowered the FDA to issue strict definitions of terms like *fat-free* and *low-calorie*. A product label wasn't allowed to make such claims unless it met certain criteria. The law also required most products to feature the Nutrition Facts panel detailing serving size, fat, calorie and cholesterol counts and more, plus a list of all the ingredients in descending order.



The claim game  
Take a closer look  
before you bite. You  
can't always believe  
what you read.

"It was one of the most complete sets of regulations ever devised for the industry," says John Rushing, Ph.D., professor of food science at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. But as it turns out, the rules didn't lead to the food-label clarity they were designed to create.

Manufacturers howled, and by December 2002, the FDA began permitting companies to put claims on food products that are not necessarily based on rock-solid science. (Dietary supplements already featured similar claims.) "Now there are so many things on a label that you're overwhelmed," says Mary Meck Higgins, Ph.D., a human-nutrition specialist at Kansas State University in Manhattan. Bonnie Liebman, director of nutrition for the Center for Science in the Public Interest, an advocacy group in Washington, D.C., agrees. "You practically have to be a medical researcher to figure out what's on a food label nowadays." >>>

But don't apply to medical school just yet! SELF combed supermarket shelves and recruited experts to expose the gimmicks some companies use to make their products seem healthier than they are. We'll show you how to read between the lines and figure out—easily—if a food is truly good for you.

## Don't be fooled by HEALTH CLAIMS

In the mid-1990s, manufacturers found a huge loophole in the regulations: While claiming a product would fight a disease required proof and the FDA's OK, saying a product improves your health—without mentioning any specific disease—needed no FDA nod. For instance, a cereal that "reduces cholesterol," like Cheerios, needs an official green light, but one that "helps maintain heart health" sidesteps regulation. "Quite often, there's no science behind unregulated claims whatsoever," Liebman says. Plus, even if the claim is based on tiny amounts of a single ingredient or nutrient, it may be trumpeted on the front of a product to distract you from other ingredients, such as trans fat, obscuring the fact that the food as a whole might not be all that good for you.

**You'll see them on** All sorts of products, including dry cereal, nutrition bars, bread and juice.

Take Sunsweet Prune Juice+, for example: The label blares "now with lutein for healthy eyes," which sounds like a valuable bonus in an already nutritious drink. Take a closer look, and you'll read that Sunsweet "offers a convenient, safe and natural way to help you maintain optimum eye health." So far, so good. But manufacturers conveniently fail to mention that the National Institutes of Health says any claims about lutein "are speculative and should be viewed with caution."

That's not to say the science doesn't look promising, but it has to be considered in context. Although researchers are interested in lutein's potential effect on age-related macular degeneration (a deterioration of the retina), and a recent study did find that taking lutein helped raise levels of the antioxidant in the retinas of study participants, the people tested were taking 2,400 to 30,000 micrograms of lutein a day. There are only 3,000 micrograms in an entire 48-ounce bottle of Sunsweet. Drink that much a day, and whatever benefits it has for your eyes will be outweighed by the 1,020 calories you'd ingest—and the extra time spent in the bathroom.

**How to shop smart** Be suspicious of health claims that don't mention a specific disease or that use terms such as *maintains, supports or enhances*, Liebman says, any of which is a tip-off the claim isn't regulated by the FDA. "These phrases are vague enough to give manufacturers wiggle room if the government or consumers ever file a lawsuit," Liebman says.

## Don't be fooled by QUALIFIED HEALTH CLAIMS

As if basic health claims weren't daunting enough for a shopper to decode, the 2002 changes also permitted companies to make qualified claims. Although these qualified health claims are subject to review by the FDA, they're backed only by what the agency calls preliminary or emerging scientific evidence. The FDA says it created qualified claims to let consumers find out about cutting-edge research. But what if research that looks promising today is disproven later? After all, for years experts thought vitamin E could help fight heart disease, only to backpedal last fall when a new study found the nutrient

may actually increase mortality. "Until there is significant scientific agreement, there's as much chance that products with such claims could hurt you as help you," says Allison Zieve, a staff attorney with Public Citizen, a consumer-advocacy group in Washington, D.C.

Currently, the FDA has approved only four qualified claims: for omega-3 fatty acids, found in fish; tree nuts, which hold a variety of healthy oils; olive oil, which has monounsaturated fatty acids; and walnuts, which contain alpha-linolenic acid, a less potent form of omega-3 than the kind found in fish. All the claims tout the effects of these foods or substances

against heart disease. Expect to see more qualified claims for heart disease and other conditions soon.

**You'll see them on** For now, packages of raw walnuts. Qualified claims are still new, so they haven't yet appeared on other products. On walnuts, you'll likely see a mention of omega-3s on the front label, followed by a longer explanation of their potential heart benefits on the back. Most nutritionists agree that preliminary findings support the walnut claim but add that plenty of other foods are equally good, if not better, in helping prevent heart disease. "These claims take things too far," says Lisa Young, Ph.D., professor of nutrition at New York University in New York City. "It makes it seem like walnuts and only walnuts have these health benefits."

**How to shop smart** Keep the claims in perspective, says Ruth Litchfield, Ph.D., assistant professor of nutrition at Iowa State University in Ames, who advises consumers to view qualified claims as "helpful suggestions" from the government and manufacturers. "Limiting fat and cholesterol in your diet will help prevent heart disease," she says. "Adding walnuts will not reduce your risk by itself. Walnuts should replace saturated fat—they're not supposed to just be added to the diet." Always check all the fine print on packaging; the description on the back of walnuts, for example, clearly puts the potential benefit of eating them in the context of following an overall healthy diet. They're not a magic bullet against heart disease.



## ➤ Don't be fooled by **PORTION DISTORTION**

You did exactly what experts recommend: You scanned the Nutrition Facts panel of a bag of chips for its fat and calorie counts. The amounts seemed moderate, so you ate the whole bag, figuring you weren't doing any real damage to your diet.

What you may have missed was the serving size. That bag that took mere minutes to inhale could have held two or even three servings, but the fat, calorie and other counts on the packaging are for only one. "This is one of the trickiest things manufacturers do," Young says. "A product is clearly marketed to be eaten all at once, yet only when you look at the label do you see it holds several servings." The FDA is reviewing the serving-size issue, but at press time, no changes were planned.

**You'll see it on** Many snack foods, sodas, juices and more. Take the Big Grab bag of Fritos typically sold in vending machines: A quick check of the panel leaves the impression it will cost you 160 calories and 10 grams of fat—not so bad. Look again. The bag actually contains 2.5 servings; only when you do the math will you see that your quick snack totals 400 calories and 25 grams of fat, about a third of your daily recommended fat intake.

**How to shop smart** Always check the serving size beforehand, Young says. To help you eyeball the right amount, dump out the package contents, if possible, and divide them up. Or simplify your snacking by opting for picks that contain only one serving per package. In a single-serving bag of Baked Lay's, you get roughly 16 large chips for 130 calories. Spend the same 130 calories on Fritos, and you get only about 20 small chips—less than a third the number in a Big Grab bag.

## Don't be fooled by **WHOLE-GRAIN HOOEY**

**You'll see it on** Breads and crackers labeled *whole-wheat* or *wheat*; multigrain, stone-ground wheat or 12-grain products are also often made from flour that's had the wheat kernel's nutritious outer layer removed. The lead ingredient in Sunbeam's Split Top Wheat variety is enriched wheat flour, the same type of flour used in white bread. Despite its healthy-sounding name, a slice of Split Top has zero fiber. The main reason the bread has as many vitamins or minerals as it does is that the wheat is enriched, says Lisa Sasson, R.D., clinical assistant professor of nutrition at NYU. The manufacturer, after removing the wheat's key nutrients during the milling process, adds some back. **How to shop smart** Buy breads that have labels indicating they are made with 100 percent whole wheat, which contains the

entire whole-wheat kernel, including the bran and the germ. Take a look at the ingredients listing, too, suggests Linda McDonald, R.D., president of Supermarket Savvy, a nutrition website, in Houston; the first ingredient should be whole-wheat flour, not plain wheat flour, unbleached wheat flour or enriched wheat flour. Also check the fiber count. "An honest-to-goodness whole-wheat bread will have at least 3 grams of fiber per slice," she says.

## Don't be fooled by **FRUIT FICTION**

"Made with real fruit" sounds healthy, right? Not always. Per the FDA, the term *fruit* includes not only produce but fruit concentrate, syrup and nectar or juice, which have had all the fiber-packed pulp processed out, McDonald says. "What's left is basically sugar water," she says, albeit with nutrients.

Even when a product has actual fruit, there's no guarantee it's enough to be good for you: The fruit in a "made with real fruit" food can be the main ingredient or a tiny speck. "You can't rely on foods with 'real fruit' labels to increase your fruit intake," warns Elisa Zied, R.D., of New York City, a spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association (ADA).

**You'll see it on** Cookies, cereals, bottled drinks, energy bars and more. Smucker's makes a jam called Simply 100% Fruit, for instance, but the chief ingredient is fruit syrup. Sunkist Fruit Snacks feature pictures of fresh fruit all over the box, and the back panel talks about the company's growers harnessing the "energy-packed goodness" of "sweet, juicy fruit." But in the ingredients listing, you'll see fruit juice, not fruit, listed. Were it not for the vitamin C that's added, the snacks would be little better than candy.

**How to shop smart** Opt for whole fruit as often as possible, Sasson says. Otherwise, remember that the less processed a fruit is, the more nutritious it will be (a fruit smoothie made with whole pureed fruit is better than juice, for instance). Applesauce is made from the pulp, so it holds more of the fruit's nutrients than a fruit bar with apple concentrate.

## Don't be fooled by **CARB CHAOS**

It's been years since the Atkins revolution first caught on, spawning generations of products with cheery labels claiming to be carb fit, reduced-carb and low in net or impact carbs. So what do these terms really mean? "Absolutely nothing," Young says. Unbelievably, the FDA hasn't yet defined what is and is not a low-carb food. As a result, manufacturers have been slapping *low-carb* on their labels and getting away with it.

## 7 simple ways to eat better

Check out the meaning of many common terms. Per the FDA:

**FREE** indicates a product has no or an insignificant amount of a nutrient, often one deemed unhealthy, like sodium. Other terms you may see include *no*, *zero*, *negligible source of* and *insignificant source of*.

**GOOD SOURCE** describes a food that contains 10 to 19 percent of your daily allowance of a nutrient, such as fiber.

**HIGH** indicates a product has at least 20 percent of the daily value for a nutrient. Also: *rich in* and *excellent source of*.

**LDW** signals a food you could eat often without exceeding daily limits for calories, fat, saturated fat, cholesterol and/or sodium. Other approved tags: *little*, *few* and *low source of*.

**LIGHT** or **LITE** means a food has half the fat or one third the calories of regular versions; *light* can also indicate at least 50 percent less sodium.

**MORE** indicates a food has at least 10 percent more of the daily value for a nutrient than its original version. Also: *enriched*, *fortified* and *added*.

**REDUCED** foods contain at least 25 percent less of a nutrient or 25 percent fewer calories than the regular product. Labels may also say *less* or *fewer*.

Have a question? Ask nutrition pro Lisa Young, Ph.D., at Self.com, weekdays from June 20 to July 1.

# eat-right need-to-know

As for net carbs, we can credit the term to the late Robert Atkins, M.D., who intended it to define the number of carbohydrates in a food that would be stored in the body, causing a spike in blood sugar. But the government hasn't come up with its own definition of net carbs, so companies have been calculating them any way they want. It's not even clear if the feds could determine an acceptable definition. "The concept of net carbs was popularized by some clever marketing people," says Cindy Moore, R.D., of Cleveland, a spokeswoman for the ADA. "It has no scientific basis." The Atkins company, for its part, cites research on the glycemic index to support the idea that certain carbs behave differently in the body.

Ironically, Atkins recently removed net-carbs claims from its products because many other manufacturers use the term, often in ways it does not regard as accurate. The company is currently introducing a system to test and identify the blood sugar response for Atkins products and plans to label them with a "net Atkins count." These new labels, however, won't be regulated, either.

Kathleen Ellwood, Ph.D., chief of the FDA's division of nutrition programs and labeling, says regulations for low-carb labels are in the works. "It's a top priority," she says but acknowledges final rules may be a year away.

**You'll see it on** Beer, energy bars, bread—pretty much anything. Take Atkins low-carb Endulge Super Premium Ice Cream in chocolate: Its 140 calories per half-cup serving are the same as you'd get in regular chocolate ice cream. But the low-carb variety has 45 milligrams of cholesterol, versus 20 milligrams in the standard version. We say go for the real thing.

**How to shop smart** Moore recommends ignoring carb claims and examining the Nutrition Facts panel. There you'll find total calories and total carbohydrates (if you're watching them). Also be aware that removing carbs from a product often worsens its taste, so manufacturers may add fat and salt to improve the flavor.

Finally, remember there's no proof low-carb diets are an effective way to slim down in the long run, Litchfield says. Although studies show you'll lose weight on them at first, there's no evidence to suggest that after a year or more, they work any better than more traditional methods of weight loss.

## Don't be fooled by NATURAL LIES

There's nothing wrong with wanting to get back to nature. Just don't make the mistake of believing a natural food is better for you, Zied says. FDA rules say a food can bill itself as 100 percent natural if it contains nothing artificial or synthetic, regardless of whether any health benefits exist.

**You'll see them on** Nearly any kind of packaged food or drink. Kix Berry Berry cereal has natural fruit flavors, according to its box, but there's no mention of fruit on the nutrition panel. The fruit flavors all come from "natural flavor that's of no health benefit whatsoever," Sasson says. Kix does contain nutrients, but the company admits the vitamins are added and the fruit is only for flavor purposes. In fact, a single serving of the cereal contains 9 grams of sugar—about the same amount you find in some miniature candy bars. **How to shop smart** Pay less attention to natural claims and more to the ingredients list, Zied says. Foods touted as natural frequently contain loads of sugar, often in a natural version like honey. "But sugar is sugar," Zied says. "It's still loaded with calories no matter what form it's in." The best solution is to buy as many foods as possible in their whole form; it's probably better to get your calcium from milk than from fortified orange juice, for instance, because there may be ingredients in the milk that work in synergy with the calcium.

Of course, nobody can be a perfect eater 100 percent of the time—maybe you like sugary cereal or the occasional Frito. But by doing a little diet detective work, you can be sure you—and your body—won't get fooled again. ■



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