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PERSONAL JOURNAL

When 'Fat-Free' Is 100% Fat:
How Food Labels Mislead

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Health Journal / By Tara Parker-Pope

A 'Fat-Free' Product That's 100% Fat: How Food Labels Legally Mislead

YOUR FOOD LABELS may be deceiving you.

Many shoppers rely on food labels to help them pick nutritious and low-calorie foods, but a closer look at labels shows many are misleading, making products seem far healthier or less fattening than they are. It's the reason you may think a 20-ounce bottle of Coke has only 100 calories (it really has 250), why cooking sprays loaded with fat can boast they are fat-free, and why a brand of peaches-and-cream oatmeal actually contains no peaches.

Last week, the Food and Drug Administration announced a major change in the 10-year-old nutrition label, ruling that food companies need to disclose the amount of artery-clogging trans fats in their products. While information about trans fats is a much-needed addition, far more needs to be done to fix the food label.

At a time when most of the country is overweight, the food label is the single most important tool dieters have to help them control how much and what kind of foods they eat. But right now, the flaws in the food label mean consumers may easily misunderstand the true content of foods, though manufacturers are complying with the regulations. Here are some areas that bear a closer look:

■ Misleading serving sizes. In the real world, a bag of chips or a bottle of soda is one serving. But on the food label, it can be listed as two or three servings. The result is that calorie information on the label often understates how much you're really about to consume.

The label on a 20-ounce bottle of soda, for instance, claims the package contains 2.5 servings at 100 calories each, even though the vast majority of people will gulp all 250 calories down in a matter of minutes.

And by manipulating the serving-size portion of the label, popular cooking sprays, made of 100% fat, can boast they are fat-free and calorie-free. That's because the FDA states that any product with less than 0.5 grams of fat per serving can claim to be fat-free. So Pam spray says a "serving" of the product equals just 0.266 grams—or a spray of one-third of a second. Most of us coat the entire pan, with no way of knowing how many calories we're really adding. ConAgra Foods, the maker of Pam, says the product is formulated so that food absorbs far less fat than when cooking with oil or butter.

The most misleading food labels are often found on foods clearly intended to be used in a single serving, such as individually packed baked goods like cookies and muffins. "Even though it's one muffin, it will say 2.5 servings, but people don't read that," says Lisa R. Young, adjunct assistant professor of nutrition at New York University. "You just assume it's one serving, because it's marketed as one serving."

■ Inconsistent labeling. A shopper choosing a Mrs. Smith's pie might be delighted to learn a 210-calorie slice of Boston cream pie has 38% fewer calories than a 290-calorie slice of lemon meringue. But all slices aren't created equal. A serving of cream pie equals one-tenth of the pie, while a slice of lemon meringue is one-

Nutrition Facts	
Serving Size 4 Crackers (14g)	
Servings Per Container about 10	
Amount Per Serving	
Calories 70	Calories from Fat 25
% Daily Value*	
Total Fat 3g	6%
Saturated Fat 1g	2%
Cholesterol 0mg	0%
Sodium 160mg	7%
Total Carbohydrate 9g	3%
Dietary Fiber 0g	0%
Sugars 1g	
Protein 1g	
Vitamin A 0% • Vitamin C 0%	
Calcium 0% • Iron 2%	

*Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your daily values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs.

	Calories: 2,000	2,500
Total Fat	Less than 65g	80g
Sat Fat	Less than 20g	25g
Cholesterol	Less than 300mg	300mg
Sodium	Less than 2,400mg	2,400mg
Total Carbohydrate	300g	375g
Dietary Fiber	40g	50g

eighth of the pie. Pull out the calculator and you'll find one-eighth of the cream pie has about 263 calories, just 10% less than the lemon.

A serving of regular Chips Ahoy! cookies has 160 calories while a serving of Peanut Butter Chips Ahoy! has just 80 calories. But look closely. There are three cookies in a serving of regular Chips Ahoy!, but just one cookie in a serving of the peanut butter variety.

■ Mystifying ingredient claims. Foods with added fruits are popular these days among consumers clamoring for healthier fare. But often, the fruit on the label isn't even in the food. Quaker Instant Oatmeal peaches & cream contains dehydrated apple and artificial peach flavor, but no peaches. Pepsi's Fruit Works strawberry melon drink contains pear juice—but no strawberries or melons.

"Companies want to put their products in the best possible light," says Michael Jacobson, executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, which highlights such "ingredient secrets" in its July-August Nutrition Action

Points of Confusion

- **Serving size**
Not a "real world" portion
- **Calorie info**
You may need a calculator to figure out how much you're really eating
- **Ingredient list**
Doesn't tell you how much of a key ingredient it really contains.
- **Weight**
Product may actually be bigger by 20% or more

HealthLetter (www.cspinet.org).

Smucker's makes a brand of spread called Simply 100% Fruit. But the strawberry version contains just 30% strawberries (the rest is fruit syrup and juices). You wouldn't know that by reading the label, because the FDA doesn't require packages to list the percentage of ingredients. The CSPI discovered the fruit content from a jar of spread purchased in

Thailand, where labels list the percent of key ingredients. A J.M. Smucker Co. spokeswoman says the company believes consumers understand the product is made with both fruit and fruit-derived ingredients.

■ Inaccurate weights. Surprisingly, many single-serving baked goods contain bigger portions than the label says. One study found these packages can contain 25% or more of the product, and thus more fat and calories, than promised on the label.

NYU's Dr. Young visited several convenience stores and weighed 19 different brands of muffins, brownies and cookies to see how they measured up against the weight listed on the label. For all but two of the samples, the measured weight exceeded the size on the label. And one-third of the products were at least a full ounce bigger—adding an estimated 100 to 175 calories more than promised on the package.

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