

READING BETWEEN THE LABELS

by Tom Simon
Shape Magazine July, 1988

You want to live longer and feel better, so you work hard to choose healthful foods, buying "light" or "low-fat" products labeled "no salt", or "100 percent vegetable oil". Unfortunately, you have just stepped into what one consumer group terms a "mine field of misleading information".

Avoiding excess fat, sodium, and cholesterol can add years to your life, but many foods that manufacturers would like you to think are healthful could raise your blood cholesterol and, if you are sodium sensitive, your blood pressure.

"Twenty years ago there was no consensus within the public health community on what foods to eat and what to avoid," says Mitchell Zeller, assistant director for legal affairs at the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI). "Now the consensus exists, and the consumer is aware of the advice and is trying to follow it. But what they are getting is misleading or incomplete labeling, so they are often unable to follow the doctor's advice."

There's no question that food labeling has improved over the years, but it still has a long way to go. Most food labeling laws are under the jurisdiction of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which CSPI criticizes for having done little over the past few years to raise labeling standards.

Nutrition labeling is voluntary; it appears on about 55 percent of processed foods and may be meaningless or misleading. On the other hand, many food producers choose complete and meaningful labeling. By knowing what to look for, you can negotiate the food label mine field. Learn to read between the lines and look for the small print.

"Choose foods with proper nutrition information," says Pat Harper, M.S., R.D., spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association. If a product has no nutrition information, choose another brand that does, so you know exactly what you are buying, she suggests. Here's a primer on reading between the food label lines:

☞ "Salt Free," "No Salt Added," and "No Salt" do not mean that the food contains no sodium. Salt, or sodium chloride, is only one of many sodium compounds in foods. Others include monosodium glutamate, sodium saccharin and sodium bicarbonate. Read the fine print and check the list of ingredients to see how low in sodium the product actually is.

Fortunately, the FDA requires that manufacturers who make nutrition claims label their products with a nutrition table, and the sodium content must be listed on each label. (A table is also required on the labels of products fortified with vitamins or minerals.)

Two years ago, the FDA set requirements for terms used to describe levels of sodium: "Reduced sodium" means the product contains 75% less sodium than the regular product; products labeled "low sodium" must have 140 milligrams or less per serving; these labeled "very low sodium" must have 35 milligrams or less; and items labeled "sodium free" must have less than 5 milligrams.

Dietary guidelines limit sodium to 1,100 to 3,300 milligrams a day, which for many Americans means cutting their intake in half. "You can cut out a third by not using your salt shaker," Harper says. "But you can easily add it right back with things like ham and bouillon and other processed foods."

☞ Serving sizes add to the confusion. The food manufacturers idea of a serving might be your idea of a nice portion for a gerbil. If you eat twice the serving size noted on the label, you get double the amount of sodium and other ingredients listed in the label's nutrition table.

☞ Would you consider milk to be low in fat? The FDA's labeling system does. Whole milk is the second largest source of saturated fat in the American diet; it contains 8 grams of fat per cup. So-called "low fat" (2 per cent fat) milk contains 5 grams per cup. American Heart Association guidelines advise 1 percent or less.

"Many consumers switch from whole (milk) to 2 percent (fat) milk thinking they have sharply reduced their fat intake," says CSPI legal director Bruce Silver glade. "But only 1 percent, 1/2 percent or skim milk are low enough in fat to reduce the risk of heart disease."

WHAT THE LABEL SHOULD TELL YOU

Some important health information is missing from most food labels. Here's what a good label will tell you.

FAT

Watch for two things: calories and saturated fat. To estimate the number of calories from fat per serving, multiply the grams of fat by nine. But fat content alone doesn't say enough. You need to know whether the food contains un-healthful saturated fat.

CHOLESTEROL

The lower the better. But this doesn't tell the whole story. Once again, make sure there's not an abundance of saturated fat, which, like cholesterol, can cause damage to your heart.

SODIUM

The recommended daily consumption is no more than 1,100 to 3,300 milligrams. Sodium amounts on the label help you to keep track of your daily intake and to see if any low or no-salt claims on the package are meaningful.

FIBER

The word "fiber" by itself doesn't mean that you're getting the dietary fiber you need. "Dietary" is the key word here. The recommended amount is 25 grams a day.