

Read a Label, Eat Better

By Joe Rosenlicht

When reading a food label, many of us focus just on things like calories, fat, carbohydrates, protein and cholesterol. These are obviously important pieces of information, but it's only part of the story. We need to look at the ingredients section and be aware of everything that's in our food, including natural vs. artificial ingredients (such as preservatives.)

Fortunately, numerous food manufacturers are introducing new products, or improving upon existing products, that use healthier ingredients. For example, Stouffer's now has a line of frozen foods made without artificial preservatives (which is prominently displayed on the front of each box.)

And what about peanut butter? If you compare the labels of the all natural peanut butters with some of the well known brands like Jif, Peter Pan and Skippy, you'll discover that the natural peanut butter has exactly two ingredients: peanuts and salt. Compare that with the brands just mentioned - sure they also have peanuts and salt, but they also slip in such things as partially hydrogenated oil (very bad) and sugar. And be careful of packaging that has the word "natural" in the product name, such as Skippy Natural. If you read the ingredients, it still contains palm oil (also very bad.) To me the all-natural brands taste just as good as the others, but that's a purely subjective thing.

Furthermore, under an FDA loophole, a product can claim "no trans fat" as long as it has less than 0.5 grams, and it can even list the amount of trans fat as zero on the nutrition label. Things like this make it all the more challenging to know exactly what we're getting.

It's also important to pay attention to the vitamin content of food, and be aware of the health benefits of each type of vitamin for us specifically. For example, are we deficient in certain vitamins and need more of them in our diet? Conversely, do we have health considerations that cause us to avoid certain other vitamins?

Healthier food options are in part a result of the public's demand for them. After all, the fastest growing section of American supermarkets is the natural and organics section. If you walk through supermarket chains such as Safeway and Giant, it'll be very apparent how many more of these types of products are now offered.

So, raising our awareness and taking the WHOLE label into account, as well as being able to decipher the sometimes misleading wording on products is a key first step to good nutrition.

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