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Reading Food Labels

Have you ever wondered how that "Smart Choices" sticker wound up on the front of Froot Loops or Cocoa Puffs box? And why is it, my 10-year-old wants to know, that her Organic cereal doesn't carry this big green check certifying that it is indeed a smart choice? Information on most labels will give you the opportunity to make some important changes, but there are many problems with deceptive labeling. The food industry, with its powerful lobbyists, is able to manipulate the laws to only give you **partial truths** in many areas. Just this month, the Food and Drug Administration said that *"nutritional logos from food manufacturers may be misleading consumers about the actual health benefits of cereal, crackers and other processed foods."* At least for now, the Smart Choices program *"will voluntarily postpone active operations and not encourage wider use of the logo at this time by either new or currently enrolled companies."*



Very little of the processed food in your grocery store (and your health food store) is nutritious. So, how do you choose nourishing food for you and your family? You can read the labels, but first you have to understand what the labels actually mean. Many people look to see how many grams of fat or carbs, or how many calories are in a serving and just how big (or small) a serving size is. That is a good start, but there is much more important information to know if you're a whole-foods enthusiast like me, or just want to make healthier choices with your food dollar.

"Organic" is a good thing because it means the ingredients meet regulations for being grown without pesticides. Organic fruits and vegetables and organically-grown dairy and meat products are nutritionally superior to conventionally grown or genetically modified products.

How healthy organic gummy bears and organic cookies made with white flour and white sugar are, is another question. The improvement is marginal at best, since white flour is nutrition-free with the mineral-rich germ and fiber-rich bran removed from the grain. Don't fool yourself—Organic food can still be junk!

In the past, I have been conned by labels such as "all natural" and "organic" and "whole wheat." "All natural" means virtually nothing and I'd advise you to flat-out ignore it. My wife reads "all natural" as **"look closer"**, as in *look closer to see what the manufacturer is trying to cover up*. High-fructose corn syrup is considered "all natural" under the law, and we all know how unhealthy it is! Most foods using the "all-natural" label are not likely to contain any whole foods.



"Whole wheat" is the most deceptive label of all. Unless it says **100% whole grain**, it isn't. A product can be labeled "whole grain" and have 90% white flour and only 10% whole-grain flour! Confusing, isn't it? Many manufacturers put a small percentage of whole-wheat flour into a mix of mostly white flour, to earn the "whole grain" label and entice the under-educated consumer into thinking he's buying

something healthy. Wheat Thins crackers are an example of this - white flour is the main ingredient.

Virtually every package that says "contains whole grains" has "wheat flour" as the first ingredient, long before the smaller amount of the whole-food ingredient. **"Wheat flour" does not mean WHOLE wheat.** It means white flour derived from wheat. You'll never read "white flour" on a label. Instead, you'll see "wheat flour" or "enriched wheat flour," which is a highly processed, nutrition-less food that leads to constipation, blood sugar spikes, and many other health problems.



Trans-fat labeling is required in the United States and there are a number of products that proudly display "no trans-fat" on their label. Yet, when you read the label more carefully, you will find that they have partially hydrogenated oil, a synonym for trans-fat. Very simply, this is the result of manipulated food laws. Manufacturers make the servings ridiculously small, much smaller than the average person would consume. As long as the trans-fat is lower than .5 grams per serving they can carry the claim "zero trans-fat."

Well, 0.49 grams is *not* the same thing as 0. A small amount of trans-fat in a tiny serving becomes a lot of trans-fat in a normal serving. For example, most popcorn "serving sizes" are only a cupful. That's far less than the big bowls most people gobble. Based on the unrealistically small serving sizes of most packaged foods, trans-fat can add up quickly, especially if you eat a lot of processed foods. If you see any hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated oils in the ingredients, then the product *does* contain trans-fat regardless of what the packaging claims. You can also do label math. A few products list saturated, monosaturated, and polyunsaturated fats. If they don't add up to the total fats, the missing number is probably trans-fat.

Bold claims on the front of the box usually signal that a manufacturer is downplaying other unhealthy ingredients. There are many examples of this, but one that is very popular right now is the large **NO TRANS-FAT** claim on the front of so many packages. The same product that has NO TRANS-FAT (or less than .5 gram per serving) can be loaded with unhealthy saturated fat, salt and sugar. Manufacturers of Dryers Dibs Bite Sized Ice Cream, Gorton's Beer Batter Crispy Fish Filets, and Mrs. Smiths Coconut Custard Pie and other products were recently accused of deceptive labeling by the FDA for not being honest when they put 0 grams of Trans-fat on the front of their containers. The no trans-fat claim led consumers to think that these were low fat products, but in each case they were high in fat or saturated fat. The Dreyers Dibs Bite Sized Ice Cream Snacks and Drumstick ice cream cones, that have the no trans-fat claim listed on the label, contain a whole lot of fat, with 19 grams for the Drumsticks and 28 grams for the Dibs. Instead of advertising "no trans-fat," the ice cream maker should have printed an alert for customers to "see nutrition information for fat and saturated fat content."



"Sugar free" products are popular because people realize that refined sugar and the blood sugar spikes it causes are unhealthy. "Sugar free" is not synonymous with healthy, since these products often do have sugar, but in forms that many people don't recognize such as dextrose or maltodextrin. Like Trans-fat, if the amount of sugar *per serving* is small enough, it is rounded down to zero. In addition, many sugar free products contain potentially dangerous artificial sweeteners like Nutrasweet, Equal, or Splenda which are arguably much more of a risk than sugar.



When the label states the food is **reduced in fat, sugar or sodium**, it means the product has at least 25% less of that ingredient than that company's regular version of that same product. But the reduction may not always be that significant. For example, one brand of soy sauce may contain 920 mg sodium per one-half ounce serving (which is more than half the sodium you can have per day on a reduced sodium diet). The reduced-sodium version contains 575 mg sodium, still has a lot of sodium. If the label says the product is 'low-fat' or 'low-sodium' instead of reduced fat or sodium, the claim is a bit more specific. Low-fat foods must have less than 3 gm total fat per serving and low-sodium foods must contain less than 140 gm sodium per serving. Be sure to check those serving sizes, though.



While claims made on food labels are regulated, they can be deceiving, to say the least. It is always wise to do a little detective work before you buy any product with a nutrition claim on the label. The "Smart Choices Program" with its big green check,

that endorsed foods like Froot Loops, Cocoa Puffs, and Fudgesicles as healthy choices is as clear of an example as any that the easiest way to avoid being deceived by food labels is to avoid the processed foods that have them. The natural whole foods that we evolved on, such as nuts, fruits, and vegetables don't usually have labels and are among the healthiest foods available. Organically grown grass-fed meat and dairy products and wild-caught fish are also healthy options.

For more examples of deceptive food labeling, check out [13 Ridiculous Food Labels that Might Be Fooling You](http://naturalbias.com/13-ridiculous-food-labels-that-might-be-fooling-you/)