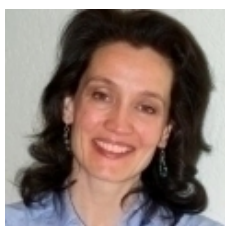


Dissecting food labels can be a healthy habit

By Mandy Kendall

I had to entertain some guests last weekend and there were some particular dietary requirements that I had to be aware of and cater for. This meant scrutinizing food labels in the supermarket in much more detail than I usually would, and it reminded me what a minefield of numbers and strange words the food-labeling world really is.

First, you have the nutrition facts and then the table with all the percentages and food groups. Then you have the list of ingredients. What's most important? What should we look at first?



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So I decided this week to highlight some of the main aspects of food labeling with *Qwik-e* tips on what to consider when deciding on your food product choices.

Zero doesn't mean zero – Labeling laws allow foods, with less than 0.5 grams per serving of an ingredient, to state that they contain zero grams of that ingredient. So for example, if you eat a food that says trans fat free, but you have 10 servings of it over a period of time you may actually be consuming up to 5 grams of trans fat without realizing it. The only way to check is to read the ingredients.

Reduced versus low – Be aware that these don't mean the same thing. Reduced means that the food contains 25 percent less of the stated ingredient than it used to. Also reducing an ingredient is not always a good thing. Reduced fat peanut butter tends to contain the same calories but more sugar and you end up going without the goodness found in the nut fat.

Serving sizes – Before you look at anything else get an idea of what all the figures on the label relate to by checking how big the serving size is. Sometimes manufacturers will state a very small serving size to make the calorie count or something else appear to be unrealistically smaller than it is.

Calorie conundrum – We all need calories to survive and there will be variations on how many we need each day depending on such things as body size, muscle mass (muscle needing more calories than fat to sustain itself) etc. However, it is generally recommended that an averagely active male should consume 2,000-2,500 calories a day with an equally active woman requiring about 1,500-2,000 calories per day. General rule of thumb is to aim to get as much nutrition rich food for your total calorie intake per day as possible. (For example, 2,000 calories of whole grains, vegetables and fruits is much better for you, and will constitute a whole days food, whereas 2,000 calories of fast food will probably only amount to one large meal and provide little or no nutrition). Once you know how big the serving size is you will have a much better idea if the calories per serving are worth it.

Fiber and sodium levels – Basic rule of thumb is the more fiber and less sodium (salt) the better. Less fiber means it's probably been over processed. More sodium tends to mean it's been so processed that more salt has had to be added to make it more palatable. More than 500 milligrams of sodium is worth considering as too high.

Check the number of ingredients – The greater the number, the less healthy the food is likely to be (unless all the herbs

and spices are listed separately). The more processed a food is the more likely it is to be full of stabilizers, preservatives and flavor enhancers – which trick our bodies into wanting more.

Check top and bottom ingredients – Check what is at the top (because food manufacturers must list the ingredients by the percentage they are in the pack with the largest listed first, and so on) and then check the ingredients at the bottom (where a lot of the preservatives and additives will be listed), if the ingredients at either end of the list don't look great chances are the ones in the middle won't either.

Do you know what each ingredient is? – Some people try to work on the premise that if they don't recognize all of the ingredients (or can't pronounce them), or couldn't reproduce the food themselves in their own kitchen, then they think twice before putting it in their shopping cart.

Avoid as many additives as possible – Many additives and preservatives have been linked with life threatening diseases. Potassium bromate (sold as bromated vegetable oil), a potentially harmful human cancer causing agent has been banned in many countries but not in the US. Other ingredients that have had negative press will be listed using other names not so easily recognized. For example trans fats may be listed as hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated vegetable oil. Also be aware that monosodium glutamate is often listed as autolyzed yeast extract, hydrolyzed vegetable protein, yeast extract, natural flavoring, spices, soy extract, protein isolate, disodium inosinate or disodium guanylate.

Look for whole grains – If a grain has been processed (as in white flour) then all the bran and germ are taken out along with many essential vitamins and minerals. Try and choose whole grains like brown rice or whole kernel rye. Be aware that many package labels will state 'whole grains' on the front but may still contain a large quantity of processed grains. Where they

are on the list will indicate what quantity there are.

Heart.org has a more details list of what food labels really mean.

Until next time.

Mandy Kendall operates Health Connective in South Lake Tahoe, which aligns wellness seekers with their ideal wellness provider. If you have questions, would like some advice, or would like to request some Qwik-e tips on any health and well-being topic, drop her an email at connect@healthconnective.com or keep an eye out on Lake Tahoe News for regular Qwik-e tips on how to make healthy changes one Quick and Easy step at a time.