

Fighting Fake Food Claims

How to decipher food marketing gimmicks and become a smarter shopper



By Katie Clark, M.P.H., R.D., C.D.E.

You've seen the ads: cereal that makes you lose weight! Yogurt to put your gut at ease! Chocolate calcium chews that replace milk! Is food really getting better for us, or are food marketers getting better at making us think so?

Super Food Showdown

These days, it seems that every time you turn around, there's an old food with a new twist. Selling food is big business, and churning out new variations of old standbys increases sales. The Food Marketing Institute reports that in 2008, the average grocery store in the U.S. carried more than 46,000 different items. In order to boost sales, manufacturers try to get you, the customer, to do one of two things: either purchase more of the same foods you are already buying, or buy more expensive versions of the foods you usually buy.

Value Added Victims

A weight-conscious shopper knows that buying more food leads to weight gain, so is unlikely to fall for bulk packaging and super-sized, calorie-laden gimmicks. But lurking around every grocery aisle and end cap awaits the new monster in food marketing: value

added foods.

Value added foods are those items that offer an innovative twist on a traditional product intended to increase profitability and value. You might be hesitant to buy flaxseed, crush it, and sprinkle it on your snack foods, but if you perceive flaxseed to be healthy and are already purchasing chips, manufacturers know you will try their slightly more expensive, new, flaxseed, tortilla chips. Likewise, if you're working on increasing fiber intake and you already use artificial sweeteners, why not pay a little more for an upgraded version of a sweetener that now has one gram of fiber per packet?

The problem with value added foods is that, most of the time, they aren't all that valuable. You end up paying for either one of two problematic situations: you are purchasing a very slight nutritional advantage that's not worth the extra money, or you are

indulging in a perceived health benefit that has not been proven to be effective.

Here are a few value added food industry favorites—and what they do or don't do:

Juice with Added Fiber

If you are trying to lose weight, dietitians and weight-loss experts often advise, “Eat your fruit—don't drink it.” While whole fruit is a great low-calorie source of fiber and nutrients, fruit juice packs in the calories and forgets the fiber in the discarded pulp. Enter fiber-enhanced fruit juice. Basically, this juice is lots of pulverized fruit with its fiber removed, and then a different type of fiber added back in. One cup of orange juice with fiber boasts 3 grams of dietary fiber per 120-calorie serving. But one old-fashioned orange has 4 grams of fiber and only 70 calories—a lower-calorie, cheaper option with no processing needed.



Drinks with Vitamins

Diet cola fans were ecstatic when the most popular diet soda in the U.S. released its “plus” product in 2008. This was basically a diet cola with a little bit of water-soluble vitamins added. Health professionals laughed at the notion of providing the type of vitamins we already get plenty of (water soluble ones) in something we already drink too much of (soda)!

Other vitamin-enhanced drinks and waters have taken off in recent years, although many are just overpriced, sugar-sweetened waters with a tad of vitamins thrown in for good measure. Despite the fact that you can get 100% of all the vitamins and minerals you need with a well-balanced diet, a broad-spectrum, generic multivitamin only costs about four cents per day. Why drop \$2.50 on fancy vitamin water when water is almost free and a

more comprehensive multivitamin is substantially cheaper?

Immunity Foods

Lately, there have been a rash of foods on the market touting “immune enhancing,” “immune boosting,” or “pro-immunity” benefits. From yogurts to cereals, drinks, and even frozen vegetable blends, manufacturers are clamoring to take advantage of your misunderstandings about immunity. While there is ample data to support the notion that a diet with insufficient nutrients compromises immunity, the opposite does not hold true: eating more nutrient-laden foods has never been proven to increase immunity. By eating a well-balanced diet and exercising regularly, you are already maximizing your immune-enhancing behavior!

Probiotics

Probiotics are live microorganisms—usually bacteria—that mimic the good bacteria in your digestive system. Prolific use of antibiotics can decrease your gut's good bacteria count. So, theoretically, increasing your probiotic intake will, in turn, replenish the helpful bacteria in your system. Foods like yogurt, milk, miso, tempeh and some soy beverages have naturally occurring probiotics.

Manufacturers have latched onto the gut health-probiotic link and are exploiting it in a host of new probiotic dairy products—usually, yogurts that are sold at steeply marked-up prices. The National Institutes of Health says, “There is limited evidence supporting some uses of probiotics. Much more scientific knowledge is needed about probiotics, including about their safety and appropriate use.”

In 2005, a conference report from the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) convened by the American Society for Microbiology pointed out that the curative effect of probiotics for gut disorders is very low and, oftentimes, is only attributable to the placebo effect—meaning that probiotics fans think that the probiotics are working, and this contributes more to alleviation of symptoms than real, curative properties of the bacteria. There is no standard recommendation regarding dosing of probiotics for health, and many experts agree con-

sumers are wise to save their money by not purchasing probiotic-enhanced foods and sticking to regular and natural probiotic-containing foods.

Gluten-Free Foods

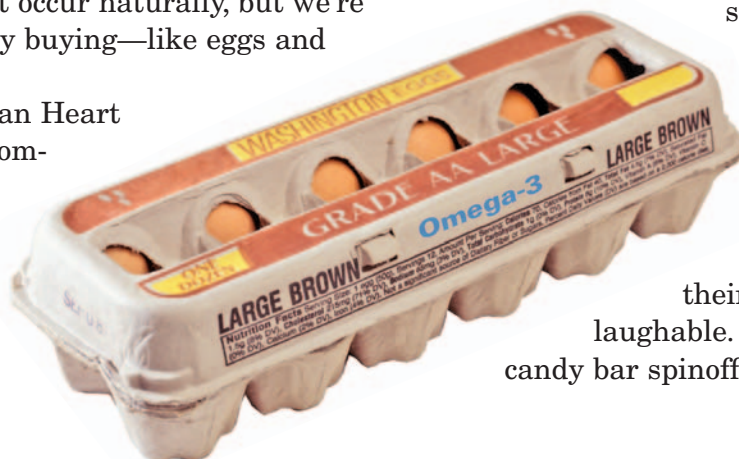
People who have celiac disease are unable to eat gluten, the protein-containing part of wheat, barley and rye. With recent improvements in diagnostic testing, the number of people with celiac disease in the U.S. is now estimated to be about one in 100. This has led to an explosion in the gluten-free food market, which uses non-gluten-containing flours to make breads, cakes and muffins.

For people with celiac disease, gluten-free foods are a godsend. For people without celiac disease, there's almost no reason to eat these specialty foods, which are often substantially more expensive than regular bread products. Health food stores play up the "healthful" side of gluten-free foods, implying that if you can purchase a gluten-free food, there must be something inherently bad about wheat and gluten. If you do not have celiac disease, or diagnosed gluten intolerance, stick to regular breads. Try to eat more 100% whole grain starches, and keep your portion sizes small if you're trying to lose weight.

Omega-3 Foods

Who hasn't heard about the heart-health benefits of omega-3 fatty acids? Omega-3s are found primarily in the tissues of fish and organ meats, fish oil and, to a lesser degree, in flax and flaxseed oil, canola and soybean oils, and walnuts. Omega-3s reduce cardiovascular disease risk, lower blood triglycerides, and can lower blood pressure. Manufacturers know we don't eat as much fish as we probably should; so why not pack the omega-3s into foods where it doesn't occur naturally, but we're prone to already buying—like eggs and butter?

The American Heart Association recommends a daily intake of 1,000 mg of EPA + DHA (two types of omega-3 fatty



acids) for people with documented heart disease. This is equivalent to eating two to three servings of fish per week. But, the omega-3-fortified foods like eggs and butter contain such small amounts of the beneficial fatty acid, and you'd have to ingest so many portions per day to get the recommended amount, that you end up losing, both financially and calorically.

The fine print on one such enhanced omega-3 butter spread reveals it contains only 32 mg of EPA + DHA per a one-tablespoon serving. If you were to get *all* of your recommended 1,000 mg EPA + DHA omega-3s from this butter, you would have to eat 31 tablespoons of butter per day (one entire tub!), racking up 2,480 calories at a cost of almost \$4 per day.

Electrolyte Drinks

Have you ever seen this scenario? A guy walks into the gym and onto an elliptical machine, works out for 20 minutes, and burns 150 calories. He walks out of the gym and into the adjacent convenience store and purchases a 32-oz. electrolyte replacement drink at a cost of 200 calories per bottle. And he wonders why he can't lose weight!

Sports nutritionists agree that electrolyte replacement drinks are only indicated when cardiovascular exercise exceeds one hour, or if you are exercising in extremely hot environments. As far as "electrolyte replacement" goes, if you are not an elite athlete, odds are you don't have to worry about replenishing post-workout salt and sodium. If you are concerned about electrolyte replacement, drink some water after a workout and eat a banana. One medium banana contains 422 mg of potassium; whereas, one cup of a well-known drink has only 32 mg of potassium, some sugar, and not much else!

Junk Food on Parade

While some value added foods make an honest attempt to convince you that you need their benefits, others are almost laughable. There's now a popular candy bar spinoff that is desperately trying to

position itself as “nutritious, long-lasting energy.” Another well-known brand of jelly-bean claims to be “scientifically formulated to maximize sports performance.” Keep in mind, friends, “If it looks like a cookie and tastes like a cookie...chances are it’s a cookie!”

Natural Means Nothing

Packaging terminology on the front of food products is advertising and not much else. From cereal bowls shaped like hearts to imply cholesterol-lowering properties to industry-created “healthy labeling” campaigns, by and large, you are best served by ignoring the front side of food packaging. Skip to the sides or back, find the Nutrition Facts panel, and start your real research there.

- Look at the ingredients list, keeping in 

Permissible Nutrient Content Claims

Despite the value added onslaught, it’s not all doom and gloom at the grocery store. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does regulate a number of nutrient content claims. If you learn the lingo and familiarize yourself with the following permissible nutrient claims, you position yourself to make educated decisions about which types of foods to choose at the store:


Sugar	
Sugar free	Less than 0.5g of sugar per serving
Reduced sugar	At least 25% less sugar per serving than its reference food
Calories	
Calorie free	Less than 5 calories per serving
Low calorie	40 calories or less per serving
Reduced or fewer calories	At least 25% fewer calories per serving than its reference food
Fat	
Fat free	Less than 0.5g of fat per serving
Low fat	3g of fat or less per serving
Reduced or less fat	25% or less fat per serving than its reference food
Cholesterol	
Cholesterol free	Less than 2 mg of cholesterol and 2g or less saturated fat per serving
Fiber	
High fiber	Food contains 5g or more fiber per serving; must also meet definition for low fat
Good source of fiber	Food supplies 2.5 to 4.9g of fiber per serving
Meat and poultry products subject to USDA regulation	
Extra lean	Less than 5g fat, 2g saturated fat and 95 mg cholesterol per serving
Lean	Less than 10g fat, 4.5g saturated fat and 95 mg cholesterol per serving

Ban on Health Claims

“The Food and Drug Administration banned health claims [on food labels] in 1906 because many foods were being sold like patent medicines; Grape-Nuts cereal, for example, was advertised as a cure for tuberculosis, malaria, and appendicitis.

—Source: UC Berkeley *Wellness Letter*, November 2009

mind that ingredients are listed in order by weight. If the first three ingredients contain sugar or sugar derivatives (usually words ending in “ose”), put it back on the shelf.

- Look for bread products with greater than three grams of fiber per serving. 

- Pay attention to serving sizes. Are you eating one serving or one box? How many servings of this food item are included per package?
- Use unit pricing. How much does one serving of a food cost per ounce, gram or piece? Compare generic brands and value added items with traditional food items.

Helpful Hints

It can be hard to face the endless wave of new items and value added foods in our markets and stores today. Here are a few final tips to help you keep your head about you when you are grocery shopping:



- Make a list before you get there, and stick to it!
- Don't go shopping on an empty stomach, as you're more likely to make impulse buys.
- Avoid clipping coupons or in-store specials for newly introduced foods you would not otherwise buy.
- Think about value added foods you are tempted to buy. Is the health claim the food is making plausible? Is there an easier (or cheaper) way to get the advertised nutrient(s)?
- Shop the perimeter of the store, buy whole foods, and avoid the processed foods hiding out in the middle aisles.

With a little bit of research and a good dose of common sense, you *can* deflect the inclination to buy impractical foods and make yourself a savvier shopper!

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