

Don't Be Fooled by Fanciful Food Labels—Read the Ingredients List

By Janet Hackert, Nutrition Specialist

These days many people are very intentional about selecting healthy and nutritious foods for themselves and their families. And yet even the most conscientious may be fooled by fanciful food labels that cleverly make the consumer think they are getting something better than they are. Don't be fooled.

Some tricks have been around for a long time. Take fruit drink labeled with "100% Vitamin C." It may have plenty of Vitamin C added, but to what? If it is fruit-flavored sugar water, or maybe just a little fruit juice, it is missing many bonuses of 100% fruit juice. Orange juice, for example, has Vitamin C. It also has some calcium, iron, phosphorus, magnesium and zinc.

Another one to watch for is whole grains. Marketers know that health-conscious consumers are looking for whole grains. At a glance, the package may say in big bright letters "WHOLE GRAIN" – but the ingredients show the whole grain as second or third on the list. Ingredients are listed by weight, with the most abundant by weight listed first. So again there would be less than what one might think. But the claim is not a lie. The package itself says, in fine print: "made with." So the consumer must be a careful reader of packages to make the best choice.

Yet another is "made with real fruit." This claim is made in cereals and other breakfast foods. Again, looking at the ingredient list can reveal that there *is* fruit in the product, perhaps listed 5th or 6th, so not as much as the shopper looking for heart-healthy fruits and vegetables might hope. A better choice might be to select the whole grain cereal or pancake and top it with fresh, frozen or canned fruit to insure the quantity that is desired.

A more recent claim is that of containing omega-3 fatty acids. These are the ones that can help lower the risk of heart disease. But not all omega-3's are created equal. EPA and DHA are the two omega-3 fats that research indicates play the biggest part in heart health. But ALA, a third kind of omega-3 fat, is the one most often added to foods and touted on the label as such. Choose to eat fatty fish to get their EPA and ALA.

For more information on this or any other subject, contact your local University of Missouri Extension office. MU Extension programs are open to all.

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