How Food Labels Can Deceive
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How Food Labels Can Deceive

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Food labels should help the consumer make an intelligent decision about the safety of the product and its nutritional value. Unfortunately they don't always do so. Now that many countries are adopting some form of consumer labeling, we should examine the uses and abuses of food labeling.

To be truly helpful the label must include: 1) serving size; 2) percentage of carbohydrates, fats, and proteins listed in an understandable reference standard; 3) percentage of the total calories per serving form each of these; 4) percentages of saturated, polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats; 5) total amount of salt per serving; 6) amount of cholesterol, if present; 7) amount of potassium present as well as the vitamins contained; and 8) all the other contents of the product, especially such hazardous additives as nitrites, or proteins that may be allergenic to some people. Unfortunately many labeling laws do not provide for this degree of candor.

If irradiation has been used to pro-long the shelf life of the product, this must be prominently displayed on the label. I advise no one to buy any irradiated food.

The present labeling regulations in America allow for many deceptive practices. For example, labels that they say "97% fat free" should be immediately suspected. Banners over frozen-dessert counters that state "96% fat-free" should also be suspect. This is a clever but deceitful marketing technique. It has no meaning without stating - which isn't how the percentage was obtained. Usually this means that the substance contains 3 or 4 percent fat by weight, that is, 3 or 4 grams per 100 grams of the product. One product that advertises "97% fat free" gives the following information on the label: serving size 1 slice, 6 servings per container, 30

calories, 1 gram fat. If we calculate the calories per one gram of fat, we see that the 9 calories from fat is 30% of the total calories. That is a 27% difference from the implied 3% fat on the label.

Another example is the calculation for milk, 53% of the calories in whole milk are form fat, 2% skim milk is 38% calories from fat and the 1% milk has 18% of its calories from fat.

Another marketing strategy is to label a product "Contains no cholesterol." This gives a false security, unless we further read the label to determine what kind of fats and how much the product contains. No vegetable fats contain cholesterol, however, coconut, palm, palm kernel oil as well as other highly saturated fats may be present. All of these highly saturated fats may be cholesterol producers after they get into the body.

Often a product may be labeled "lite," "light" or "diet," terms which have no legal definitions nut set up ideas in the consumers mind that suggest they are better than other products.

Always not well on the nutritional label the amount that is considered a serving size and servings per container. Verify that the serving size is what you will be consuming. A common practice amongst some frozen dessert products is to list the calories per ounce, implying that an ounce is what you will consume; however, you are more likely to consume eight ounces - 8 times the listed calories.

My favorite popcorn lists the serving size as [?]oz (14g); 8 servings per container, 80 calories, 2 grams protein, 6 grams carbohydrates, 5 grams fats, 150 mgm sodium, no cholesterol. What does this actually mean when we consider that a popcorn lover would probably eat the entire bag? He would have consumed 640 calories, 56.25% from fat and 1,200 mgms of salt (almost a total day's recommend intake!).

In order for us to meet our goals of a proper diet (See my April, 1989, column) consisting of 10-25% of calories from fat, with a preponderance of

monounsaturated fats, low in salt and high in dietary fiber, we must both read the labels and do some simple calculations.

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