

How to Read a Nutrition Label

by GEORGE JOSEPH



FORGET about calculus, geometry, and trigonometry. For that matter, you can dump biology, psychology, and physics. If you want to study something really difficult, try a nutrition label. That's right, that little rectangular box that appears on everything from soup to nuts—literally. A May 1999 statement from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (on the fda.gov web site) boasts that “the food label offers more complete, useful and accurate nutrition information than ever before.”

I like to think of myself as intelligent, but I do believe that nutritional advisories could confuse Einstein himself. I'm equally convinced that they're designed to stump the general public. Consider some examples.

ARE YOU BEING SERVED?

One of the first things you encounter on a food label (which is entitled “Nutrition Facts”) is the “serving size.” For example, consider a 20-ounce bottle of Coke. How many servings are in there? The label says two and a half, believe it or not. Why two and a half? While I can't say for sure, my suspicion is that the odd figure is a ploy to drive down the calorie count. In other words, if the nutrition label says that a serving contains 120 calories, the manufacturers might hope you will conclude that the entire bottle contains 120 calories. Who would think that two and a half people are supposed to share? With two and a half servings, then, you have to do some math. The total number of calories, in fact, would be 300—enough to give second thoughts to those who are trying to lose weight!

Are such labels deceptive? Kinda. Deliberate? Probably. Illegal? No. After all, the information on the label is accurate (albeit confusing) and everything you need to know is there. My advice is to avoid the tricky labels by opting for seltzer instead of a sugar-charged soft drink. The calorie count is zero, no matter how many servings you consume!



NUMBED BY NUMBERS

But I get really confused when I look at Orville Redenbacher's microwave popcorn. Here's what the label says:

"Serving Size: 3 Tbsp. (38g) unpopped (makes about 7.5 cups popped)

Servings Per Bag: about 2"

Then we come to the "Amount Per Serving," which is 110 calories for "3 Tbsp. Unpopped" and 15 calories for "1 Cup Popped."

Is it just me, or is this more than we need to know? First of all, who's going to eat even one tablespoon of unpopped popcorn, let alone three? Maybe Hannibal Lecter would, but then his tastes tend to differ from those of the normal person. I, like most human beings, prefer my popcorn popped—unless I plan to use them as bullets.

So let's assume that we're going to eat popped popcorn, like most people do. How many calories are we consuming if we eat the entire bag? The answer is easy—if you're majoring in calculus. If, as the label states, each serving size of three tablespoons unpopped makes 7.5 cups popped and there are two three-tablespoon servings in a bag, that means each bag contains 15 cups (popped, that is). And if each popped cup contains 15 calories, then each bag contains 225 (15 x 15) calories.

Now, my version of the label simply would say:

"Serving Size: 1 Bag—Just eat the whole thing! Calories: 225—Deal With It!"

OF FAT AND FIBER

Let's move on to the rest of the label. Under the serving information we have the total grams (per serving, I assume) of



fat, cholesterol, sodium, carbohydrates, protein, and iron. This column shows the percentage of daily value in each of these categories. For example, with that dreaded popcorn label, the total fat is 3 percent of the daily value. But then there is a different figure for a popped serving, which is zero percent. So where did all the fat go? On the inner walls of my microwave?

All kidding aside, we living in the age of "super-sizing," so portion control is more important than ever. According to the article "Cut the Fat," in the January 2004 issue of Consumer Reports, "65 percent of American adults are overweight or obese, up from 47 percent 25 years ago." The report also states: "If you want to cut back on added sugar, you'll get little help from the current U.S.-government-mandated food label. The 'sugars' specified on the label include both the intrinsic and added kinds. An example: Yoplait's Yumsters strawberry low-fat yogurt is labeled as 'perfect for toddlers.'

But each 4-ounce container includes 18 grams of sugar, compared with just 8 grams—all from milk—in the same amount of plain low-fat yogurt. The sweetened sugar contains not only sugar, listed second on the list of ingredients, but also high-fructose corn syrup, listed fourth."

In a similar way, a product reportedly can be called "salt-free" and still be high in sodium. Why? Because the word "salt" here refers to sodium chloride. So a product that is high in sodium but not chloride legally can be called "salt-free."

DECEPTIVE CLAIMS

Food products make all kinds of claims, and it's good to know something about their meaning. For example, when a certain food claims to be 95 percent fat free, it must have no more than 5 grams of fat per 100 grams of the produce. That's simple math. But what does "reduced fat" mean? And how "low" is "low sodium"?

How "high" is a "high fiber" content? There are strict guidelines issued by the Food and Drug Administration on these and many more questions. For example, a product cannot say that it has "less" or "fewer" calories than another product unless it truthfully contains at least 25 percent less than the reference product. The term "fresh" can only be applied to food that is raw or unprocessed. In addition, says the FDA web site, truly "fresh" food "has never been frozen or heated, and contains no preservatives. (Irradiation at low levels is allowed.) On the other hand, the terms 'Fresh frozen,' 'frozen fresh,' and 'freshly frozen' can be used for foods that are quickly frozen while still fresh." Confused?

It gets even fuzzier. One consumer was indignant when she discovered that the supposedly 98-percent fat free milk she was drinking in reality had much more than 2-percent fat. How can this be? According to one expert, the percentage of fat noted on the label can legally be compared to the total weight of the product rather than its calories from fat. This made the milk appear less fattening than it really was! Following the same line of thought, a serving of french fries might claim to contain only 5 percent fat, but this could simply mean that the fries contain 5 percent of their total weight as fat. When the percentage of total calories in the food as fat is factored in, the real fat content in the above serving of fries comes out to whopping 28 percent!

The answer to all this is simple. Read the label carefully and read up on the Food and Drug Administration's guidelines at their web site (fda.gov). And, above all else, brush up on your math. You'll need it! ■

