

Food Packaging Traps - 5 Nutrition-Savvy Tips

Adapted by Personal Safety Nets® from “Don't Fall for These Diet Traps” By David Zinczenko with Matt Goulding (authors of Eat This, Not That! Supermarket Survival Guide) published in Women's Health Magazine (July 2009)



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Grocery shopping is something we take for granted – you do it for yourself, your family, or possibly as part of a Safety Net for another. And when you walk into the store, emblazoned on nearly every box, bag, and bottle on every shelf is a multitude of nutritional claims, essentially screaming, "Buy me! Buy me!" But by learning a few tips you'll be able to sort out the bad from the good—and save yourself a bundle in the process. **First thing you'll need to know: claims are marketing ploys, pure and simple.** For instance, you might notice a label on a package of cookies that proclaims "fat-free!" But what you don't see (unless you examine the tiny print on the Nutrition Facts panel) is that those cookies are loaded with sugar and additives. So here are some rules to follow to make you a truly savvy shopper.

1. Numbers can be deceiving: On the front of a box of reduced-fat Keebler Club Crackers—in big yellow letters, no less—you'll find the following claim: "33% Less Fat Than Original Club Crackers." The math is accurate: The original product does contain three grams of fat per serving, while the reduced-fat version has two grams. It is a 33 percent difference—but we're only talking about one gram of fat here! And what you won't see advertised on the box is that this version has 33 percent more carbs. To add flavor, they replace that one gram of fat with three grams of refined flour and sugar—hardly a healthy trade-off.

Tip: Buy whole-wheat crackers that pack at least three grams of filling fiber per serving. They'll leave you less likely to start noshing later.

2. "Healthy" logos are bought, not just earned: Many instant oatmeals wear the American Heart Association seal like a badge of honor, yet they have more sugar than a serving of Fruit Loops. If you read the fine print below the logo, you'll see that it simply meets the AHA's "food criteria for saturated fat and cholesterol." In other words, it could contain a pound of sugar and still qualify. How is this? Companies pay for a product to bear the AHA sign. This explains why the AHA check mark might appear on one product but not on another, even when both meet the guidelines.

Tip: Choose unsweetened oatmeal and other cereals to prevent a sugar high (and a calorie binge), and then sweeten them yourself with just a touch of honey, almond milk, or cinnamon.

3. "Good source" claims are questionable: Don't be fooled by labels touting foods as "good" sources of vitamins and minerals: A serving needs just 10 percent of the recommended daily value of a specific nutrient to be considered a "good source." Take Nabisco Honey Teddy Grahams, a "Good Source of Calcium." You'd have to eat 10 servings—that's the entire box and

then some—to get the amount you need for the day. If you're plowing through boxes of cookies to get your daily requirement, a lack of calcium is going to be the least of your health problems. **Tip:** To get any of your nutrients, stick with nature's multivitamins: fruits and vegetables, low-fat dairy, and lean meats. Whereas with fortified cookies your calcium comes with only sugar, when you eat the bone-builder in low-fat milk and cheese you also get a healthy dose of fat-burning, muscle-making protein.

4. Health benefits may be exaggerated: If you drink bottled green tea, you probably think it's teeming with antioxidants. But some brands are not packed with free-radical killers as manufacturers would like you to believe. An independent food laboratory analyzed 14 different bottled green teas for their levels of catechins, the antioxidants in tea that are thought to fight disease. The finding: Catechin content varied widely among brands. Honest Tea Organic Honey Green Tea topped the charts with an impressive 215 milligrams, but some products barely registered on the antioxidant scale. Ito En Tea's Tea Lemongrass Green had just 28 milligrams, and Republic of Tea Pomegranate Green Tea had a meager nine.

Tip: You know you're safe with Honest Tea, but you can also boost your catechin levels by brewing your own and letting it steep for at least five minutes.

5. "Lean" meats are usually full of sodium

When you remove fat, you lose juiciness. To prevent virtuous cuts of meat from tasting like shoe leather, some manufacturers enhance their poultry, pork, and beef products with a solution of water, salt, and nutrients that impart flavor. This practice can dramatically boost the meat's sodium level. For example, a four-ounce serving of regular turkey tenderloin contains a mere 55 milligrams of sodium, while the same amount of a low-fat enhanced version packs 840 milligrams. You're swapping one evil (fat) for another—belly-bloating and blood-pressure-hiking sodium.

Tip: Stick with regular turkey and other naturally lean meats; just watch portion size. All you need is one or two paper-thin slices to satisfy your taste buds. And if it says "enhanced," walk on by.