

Knowing Food Labels Pays Off

by Tim Ditman
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This is part one of a two-part story on reading food labels. Visit the OSF Newsroom later this month to read part two on reading nutrition facts.

Carly Zimmer admits it's tough.

You walk down the grocery store aisle looking for healthy food. Bright colors and buzzwords like “organic” and “gluten free” catch your eye. The people who market food are good at what they do, after all.

But Zimmer, a registered dietitian-nutritionist at OSF HealthCare, says when you master reading food labels, finding your desired morsels gets easier each shopping trip.

“Label reading can be very tedious when you first start, especially when it goes along with a new diagnosis,” Zimmer says. “But once you get in a rhythm and know what foods are suitable for your diet, it does get easier. It becomes habit.”

Front of the package

Zimmer outlines some of the common words and phrases used to market food:

- **Natural:** Zimmer says the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) doesn’t specifically define “natural.”

“In general, the FDA says ‘natural’ means no added colors, additives and things like that. But it doesn’t necessarily mean it’s healthy,” Zimmer says.

An example of the inconsistency: “Sugar is considered ‘natural’,” Zimmer says.

- **Reduced:** Examples include “reduced fat” or “reduced calories.” This means the ingredient is 25% less than the original item.

But look out, Zimmer says. When something is taken out of a food, something else – like salt or sugar – is usually put in to make the item tastier.

- **No added:** A common use is “no added sugar.” This means the only sugar in the food is naturally occurring. Things like honey or high fructose corn syrup are not present.

Zimmer says this label is generally a green flag, but watch for artificial sweeteners in the product.

- **Organic:** This is a term tightly defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). It describes how the food was grown and processed. But it’s another term that doesn’t necessarily equate to good health, Zimmer says.

“It can still have high amounts of fat, sugar and salt,” Zimmer warns.

- **Healthy:** Zimmer says there are FDA guidelines about what products can be labeled “healthy,” but they are outdated, going back to the mid-1990s. Generally, the rules say “healthy” describes foods that are low in fat, sugar and salt.

But dietary guidelines have changed. That's why the agency is looking at [updating and tightening the rules](#), to the dismay of the big food companies.

- Made with: Examples here include “made with whole wheat” or “made with whole grains.” Terms like “honey wheat” or “multigrain” are also seen often.

“Those can be pretty misleading,” Zimmer says.

“All that means is there's some type of whole grain in the food,” she says. “When we're looking for grains like bread, cereal and crackers, we want those to be whole grains. The label ‘multigrain’ doesn't necessarily mean it's a true whole grain. The only way to know that is to look at the ingredients, and the first word is ‘whole’.”

Ingredients are listed in descending order by weight, so the first one is the most abundant, Zimmer adds.

- Source of: Common terms are “good source of fiber” or “excellent source of protein.”

Good means the nutrient, in a single serving, is 10% to 19% of a daily value based of a 2,000 calorie per day diet. Excellent is 20% or more.

- Gluten free: Zimmer says people equate this label to being healthy. But, she says you only need a gluten free diet if medically necessary.

“Things that are gluten free and have always been gluten free now have that label on the package just because of food marketing,” Zimmer says.

Learn more

Learn more about food labels of the [FDA website](#), and visit the [OSF HealthCare website](#) for healthy recipes. There are also popular [smartphone apps](#) that scan food labels and decipher fact from fiction.