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Vol2 Issue 40 – Deciphering Food Labels

The 2010 Dietary Guidelines released by the US Department of Health and Human Services identify 3 broad goals for Americans in order to improve or maintain health:

- ✓ Balance calories with physical activity to manage weight
- ✓ Consume more of certain foods and nutrients such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, fat-free and low-fat dairy products, and seafood
- ✓ Consume fewer foods with sodium (salt), saturated fats, trans fats, cholesterol, added sugars, and refined grains

The third goal tends to elude us because of our lack of understanding in reading labels. Sometimes the toughest part of taking the advice of our doctors in regards to changing our diet is figuring out how to read the labels on the foods we eat. With so many different ingredient names and the phrases on labels designed to catch your attention, it can be overwhelming trying to make good food choices.

One of the ingredients we are advised to decrease consumption of is added sugars.

Added sugars are sugars and syrups added to food or drinks during food processing. As consumers, we are aware of many of the high-sugar food products such as cakes, candy, sweet rolls, and fruit drinks. Those foods are easy to spot when trying to avoid added sugar consumption.

However there are many other ways that added sugar might be identified on the label. Some of those “other” words used to identify added sugar include: anhydrous dextrose, sucrose, high-fructose corn syrup, invert sugar, maltose, nectars, or corn syrup, among others. Being aware of the alternative sugar sources food processors use in food can help us when we read food labels and make food choices.

Another food ingredient that often gets 'camouflaged' in the food label is solid fat. Solid fats are those fats that are solid at room temperature such as butter, beef fat, and shortening. Most solid fats come from animal foods, but they can also be made from vegetable oils through a process called hydrogenation. Common examples of solid fats include milk fat, chicken fat, stick margarine, butter, and shortening.

As a rule, solid fats are high in saturated fats and/or trans fats. These types of fats can raise the LDL cholesterol levels in our body and increase the risk of heart disease when consumed in excess. The LDL cholesterol is considered "bad" for our body and heart health. Solid fats have less monounsaturated or polyunsaturated fats (which are high in HDL – the "Good" cholesterol) needed by our body to absorb fat-soluble vitamins and aid the healthy functioning of our body systems.

Being aware of the fat content and the type of fat contained in the food is the first step to making healthy food choices that reduce your consumption of solid fats. If you look at the labels provided (Illus. 1 & 2), you will find the nutrition label for skim milk and for 2% milk. If you look closely, you will see that, although the calcium provided by one cup of each type of milk remains the same, you can significantly reduce your fat consumption by choosing skim milk. Additionally, over half the fat found in the 2% milk is saturated fat – the fat that increases LDL cholesterol in your blood.

You will also notice that the %Daily Value for 2% milk is 8% while skim milk is 0%. This means that, of the amount of fat you need each day for healthy living, the 2% milk uses 8% of that amount – leaving 92% available from other foods you eat. If you drink 2 cups of 2% milk, you have used 16% of your %Daily Value for fat and 30% of the daily value of saturated fat recommended for a healthy diet.

Nutrition Facts	
Serving Size 1 cup (236ml)	
Servings Per Container 1	
Amount Per Serving	
Calories 120	Calories from Fat 45
% Daily Value*	
Total Fat 5g	8%
Saturated Fat 3g	15%
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 20mg	7%
Sodium 120mg	5%
Total Carbohydrate 11g	4%
Dietary Fiber 0g	0%
Sugars 11g	
Protein 9g	17%
Vitamin A 10% • Vitamin C 4%	
Calcium 30% • Iron 0% • Vitamin D 25%	
*Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your daily values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs.	

Illus. 1 (www.FDA.gov)

Nutrition Facts	
Serving Size 1 cup (236ml)	
Servings Per Container 1	
Amount Per Serving	
Calories 80	Calories from Fat 0
% Daily Value*	
Total Fat 0g	0%
Saturated Fat 0g	0%
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol Less than 5mg	0%
Sodium 120mg	5%
Total Carbohydrate 11g	4%
Dietary Fiber 0g	0%
Sugars 11g	
Protein 9g	17%
Vitamin A 10% • Vitamin C 4%	
Calcium 30% • Iron 0% • Vitamin D 25%	
*Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your daily values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs.	

Illus. 2 (www.FDA.gov)

<http://www.fda.gov/Food/IngredientsPackagingLabeling/LabelingNutrition/ucm274593.htm#twoparts>

Perhaps you are reading this and saying “I can’t stand skim milk.” Some people don’t, but there are still ways to incorporate it into your diet. Instead of using whole or 2% on your cereal in the morning, use skim milk. If you drink whole milk now, buy some 1% milk and mix it with the whole milk in diminishing ration until you are able to completely adjust to 1% milk. Remember, the good nutrients needed by your body will stay the same in the two types of milk, but the fat is what changes.

The 3rd goal for the Dietary Guidelines has another specific food content recommendation. Reducing sodium (salt) in our diet is another important piece to attend to. The American Heart Association reports that most Americans consume more than twice the amount (3,400 mg daily) than is recommended. The AHA recommends we strive to keep our total daily sodium intake to below 1,500 mg.

In order to do that, we first need to know the sources of sodium in our diet. Foods known to be high in sodium include: sauerkraut, regular

canned soups, processed cheese, potato chips and pretzel, regular peanut butter, and catsup, just to name a few. The Center for Disease Control reports that over 75% of the sodium in an American's diet comes from processed and restaurant foods while only a small amount of that total comes from the salt shaker.

Research shows that reducing sodium and increasing potassium consumption in combination can help reduce the risk of high blood pressure and reduce the risk of other health problems.

Being intentional with your food choices by reading labels and reducing sodium, solid fats, and added sugars are great steps to take for your health. For more information about healthy eating habits, contact me at the Geary County Extension office at 238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!