

How to Read a Nutrition Label at the Supermarket

Here's what to look out for on food packaging so you can buy the best products for your health and avoid misleading information and ingredients.

06 Dec 2016 by Davelle Lee



With supermarket shelves filled with thousands of products, it can be tricky – and time-consuming – to figure out which ones are healthy choices for you and your family. The best way is to learn how to decipher a food label so you can pick the most nutritious option every time. Chan Joy Seng, director and nutritionist of Alive Nutrition Consultancy, shares these pointers.

1 Take nutrition claims with a pinch of salt

“There are lots of marketing gimmicks out there,” says Joy Seng, referring to nutrition claims printed on food packaging, some of which can be misleading.

For instance, a product that proclaims it contains “reduced fat” may not necessarily be low in fat. Rather, it only has to contain 25 per cent less fat than the original product.

“Fat-free” does not translate into low calories either. Joy Seng says fat-free foods may be compensated by a high amount of sugar to make them taste better.

And don’t be fooled when you see “cholesterol-free” on a bottle of palm oil. “Cholesterol is only from animal sources,” he explains. “But that doesn’t mean palm oil is any healthier. In fact, it’s still high in saturated fat, which is really bad for your heart.”

2 Do a quick scan

Confused by the long list of ingredients on the food label? Don’t be. Joy Seng says food companies are legally obliged to list ingredients in descending order by weight. So just focus on the first three on the list – these are the most crucial, as they usually make up more than 90 per cent of the product.

Once you start doing this, you’ll be surprised that the star ingredient advertised on the product often isn’t the main one. “Take, for example a popular hazelnut spread. Sugar is the first ingredient on the list, followed by palm oil. Hazelnut comes third,” says Joy Seng.

Next up, check for real foods – the more that are listed, the better for your health. If the list is cluttered with names of chemical compounds and additives, the product may not be very good for your health.

3 Look out for misleading ingredients

These include:

- *Vegetable oil* When the type of vegetable oil isn’t specified, it’s usually palm oil, which is full of unhealthy saturated fat and worse for your health than other plant varieties like canola, sunflower or peanut oils.
- *Milk solids* This refers to milk powder, in which most of the vitamins in milk are lost through processing.
- *Brown sugar* The only difference between white and brown sugar is that brown sugar contains residual molasses, which give it a darker colour and different taste. It’s just as unhealthy as the white sugar.
- *Sea salt and Himalayan salt* These are not healthier alternatives to table salt – only low-sodium salt is.

4 Compare nutrition information panels

Nutrition information panels don’t all look the same. This is because the Agri-food and Veterinary Authority in Singapore (AVA) doesn’t require companies to use a standardised format unless they are applying for the Healthier Choice Symbol.

Most nutrition information panels list the amount of energy (in kcal), carbohydrates, proteins, total fat, fibre, calcium, cholesterol and various vitamins.

The recommended format includes serving size, and the amount of energy and nutrients per serving, as well as per 100g or ml. Joy Seng explains: “Serving size refers to the amount people usually consume in one sitting. For example, the suggested serving size for any brand of sliced bread is typically two slices.”

But because serving sizes can vary between brands, it isn't always useful to look at the amount of energy and nutrients per serving when you're trying to figure out which option is healthier.

In such cases, the amount per 100g or ml gives you a better basis of comparison across the board. "This is a straightforward way of comparing the amount of nutrients for the equivalent weight of similar food items for each brand," says Joy Seng.

But he also cautions that using this measure isn't that effective when comparing different food items. "100g of full cream milk is going to contain a lot less fat than 100g of butter. That doesn't mean it's a lot healthier than butter. Milk simply has a much higher water content than butter."

Also, watch out for ingredients you might be allergic to or unable to eat due to religious restrictions. "Companies are not required by Singapore law to print warning labels," explains Joy Seng. Better to be safe than sorry.

5 The Healthier Choice symbol is not a free pass to binge

While the Health Promotion Board (HPB) does a thorough investigation into all products that apply for the Healthier Choice symbol to make sure they're indeed better for your health than other products, Joy Seng says seeing the symbol on the food label is no excuse to eat more of that product.

"The HPB assesses the amount of specific nutrients such as sugar, sodium and fats, and compares them with similar products," he says. For foods already very high in a particular nutrient of concern, such as sugary cereals, the Healthier Choice Symbol can only point out the lesser of two evils but definitely does not guarantee you a healthy choice.

The Good, Bad and Ugly

Good nutrients to look out for include:

- *Fibre* Women need 20g daily. Men need 26g.
- *Calcium* Both men and women should be getting 0.8g a day.
- *Protein* Women need 58g, while men need 68g.

The baddies include:

- *Total fat* Women should not consume more than 55g a day, while men should keep to 65g per day. In particular, avoid saturated fat and trans fat. Saturated fat includes lard, ghee, butter or palm oil that can increase bad cholesterol in your body, and as a result, increase your risk of heart disease. Trans fat is commonly found in hydrogenated oils like margarine and shortening; it not only increases bad cholesterol levels, it also decreases good cholesterol levels
- *Cholesterol* Cap it at 300mg a day
- *Sodium* Limit to 2,000mg a day