Label smarts: the nutritional goods on grocery shopping

Making a meal from fresh unprocessed foods is the best thing you can do for your diet, but sometimes finding time to cook can be a challenge. If pre-made products are the only option, you can still stack your cart with healthier selections by getting smart about the products you choose. The tips below can help you decipher label lingo and ensure you get the best nutritional value from your purchase.



Get the low-down on "low." Controlled calorie, fat and sodium intake is an important part of maintaining a healthy diet. But how low is low? Food marked "low fat" should contain three grams of fat or less per serving. Foods labelled "reduced fat" are at least 25 per cent lower in fat or calories when compared to another similar product. The term "light" has less significance. In some cases "light" can even refer to the lighter colour of the product, not its reduced calorie or fat content.

Watch portion size. The crackers you love claim to have only six grams of fat per serving, but keep your eye on the portion size. If two crackers are considered one serving and you normally wolf down five at a time, it might not be such a smart snack. One way to try and avoid overeating is by taking out individual servings and packaging them separately instead of munching straight from the box.

Know your fats. All fats are not created equal. Unsaturated or "good" fats, such as olive, sunflower, corn and soy oils, are much healthier and can actually reduce your blood cholesterol levels. Because of their high calorie and fat content, these oils should still be eaten in moderation.

Steer clear of artery-clogging saturated fats. Hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated vegetable oil listed on a label indicates that the product contains saturated or trans fats. This is a reason to put the product back on the shelf. Avoiding these 'bad' fats not only lowers your risk of heart disease but also helps you to maintain a healthy body weight.

Fibre up! Eating a high fibre diet lowers your risk of heart disease, obesity and bowel-related problems, including constipation and colon cancer. Look for foods with high fibre content or marked as a "source" of fibre, which means two grams or more per serving. Stay away from white breads and choose products with whole grains to boost your fibre intake.

Beware of baked goods disguised as whole grain. Items labelled multi-grain, for example, are often loaded with white flour. Look for items labelled 100 per cent whole grain for maximum fibre and health benefits.

Down with added sugars. Naturally occurring sugars, such as those found in milk, fruits and vegetables, provide energy and are generally loaded with vitamins and minerals. Added sugars, on the other hand, are considered "empty calories" because they're generally found in foods with little nutritional value such as candy or soft drinks. Keep your waistline trim and your blood sugar stable by passing on items with refined sugars such as fructose, dextrose, corn syrup and brown sugar. The World Health Organization suggests no more than 12 teaspoons or 48 grams of refined sugar per day. Artificial sweeteners should also be avoided as they've been shown to increase cravings for sweet food.

Slow down on sodium. Pre-packaged foods and even healthier "low-fat" options are typically loaded with salt, which can raise your blood pressure and weight and can cause bloating. Switch to lower-sodium options of canned soups, broths, soy sauce and bouillon cubes, and try to limit your intake to 2300 milligrams of sodium a day.

Of course the easiest way to know exactly what goes into your body is to make it from scratch yourself. But when modern-day reality gets in the way and you've got to grab faster options, a little label logic can help you stay smart about the foods you choose.