



EXTENSION

FOOD LABELS OFTEN MISLEAD CONSUMERS

If you take a stroll down any aisle in the grocery store, consumers will see all kinds of food labels touting products as being healthy choices. Cholesterol-free produce, gluten-free water, natural soda, 100 percent whole-grain cookies and non-GMO carrots are just a few examples of the many claims shoppers may see on the front of food packages in the United States.

Many consumers believe these claims mean the food product they are purchasing is healthier for them and their family. What it really means is the companies advertising these products are taking advantage of the lack of understanding of the public to increase their profit, said Jenni Kinsey, Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension assistant specialist, youth Community Nutrition Education Programs.

“The supermarket is full of misleading food marketing, all of which is aimed at unsuspecting customers who simply want to purchase healthy foods for their family,” Kinsey said. “Unfortunately, consumers don’t always have a good understanding of the verbiage used on the labels. For example, cholesterol is only found in animal-based products. Therefore, produce of any kind should never contain cholesterol. In fact, anything not derived from an animal product should be cholesterol free.”

It does not take long to find various products claiming to be gluten free, including bottled water. Gluten is a protein found in wheat, barley and rye, and therefore, water obviously is gluten free. But consumers wanting to buy healthy products, often snatch up products based solely on the wording on the package without fully understanding what they are buying. Consumers really shouldn’t be concerned about avoiding gluten unless they have a medical diagnosis and they are working closely with a medical provider.

“The term natural is another one that stands out to consumers. Currently, the U.S. Food & Drug Administration doesn’t have an official definition of natural. Therefore, this claim is up for the taking by countless food products, including soda, chips and other foods that most know we should limit,” she said. “Remember, a natural label claim is not a health claim. Consumers may pay more for the product with the natural label claim even though it is no different from the product next to it without the natural label claim.”

Despite the label claiming a product is made or baked with 100 percent whole grain does not make that product whole grain. Kinsey said if a food product includes whole grain in its ingredients, the package can advertise made with whole grain. However, this leads the consumer to believe they are getting a whole-grain product when they actually are not. To

ensure you are purchasing a whole-grain product, look for 100 percent whole grain on the packaging.

Kinsey said there is a lot of talk about bioengineered foods or genetically modified organisms, also known as GMOs. These are used to increase crop yield and feed more people with fewer resources.

“This ultimately leads to more affordable food products. Examples of the reason these foods are bioengineered include, but are not limited to, improved drought tolerance, improved mineral absorption and insect resistance,” she said. “Despite the fact only 10 GMO foods are approved for sale in the United State, thousands of foods advertise GMO-free on the label when they do not contain and never did contain the approved GMO foods. This is simply an advertising tactic to get the upper hand on competing brands.”

The 10 approved GMO foods for sale include alfalfa, apples, canola, corn, cotton, papaya, potatoes, soybeans, summer squash and sugar beets.

Although there is an FDA front-of-package labeling initiative to combat misleading food-marketing practices, it will take years and possibly even decades to overcome all of the inappropriate claims.

“What you can do now is educate yourself, learn about ingredients and question the food label claims,” Kinsey said. “Get in the habit of asking yourself if the claim even makes sense and you’ll begin recognizing the mass number of misleading label claims.”



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