22.8: Guest Lecturer

**Guest Lecturer:** Judy Fitzgibbons, MS, RD, LD

**Nutrition Label Zone: Thinking Required**

Nutrition labels give us the facts about the foods, but we still must make the buy or not-buy decision, based on the information provided and our knowledge of our nutritional needs and goals. Here are three ways you can use your nutrition knowledge to be a wise consumer:

1. Develop your sense of the nutritional value of basic, minimally processed foods
2. Beware of decision-making based on single nutrients
3. Control the “problem potential” of “fun foods”

**Learning About the Nutrients in Foods**

Knowing the nutrients we should expect in foods guides us over the first decision hurdle of whether a food will help meet our basic nutrient needs or whether to relegate it to the “fun food” category that adds mostly calories.

For example, snack crackers are basically flour and shortening or oil. “Multi-grain” or “wheat” crackers in yellow or brown packaging give the impression they’re made from whole grain flour and so would seem to be a good snack choice. By checking the ingredient list and reading the nutrient content on the label, we can tell whether or not they are the nutritious snack we expect.

A slice of whole wheat bread, containing a little more than 2 grams of fiber, as well as contributing B-vitamins and iron, gives us a reference point. We should expect about the same from an ounce or so of whole grain crackers. If the
ingredient label shows that whole wheat (or other whole grain flour) is in the top two ingredients and the nutrition facts label shows the nutrients we expect, the crackers offer a healthy choice. On the other hand, if the fiber content looks acceptable, but there is no whole grain flour listed (or it falls low on the list), you will probably find a refined fiber, such as oat fiber, listed. This increases the fiber content, but doesn’t bring along with it the other nutrients we expect from oats. High fiber in foods does not guarantee whole grain.

Learning what to expect from basic foods improves our ability to make smart food choices.

**Beware of Single-Nutrient Decision-Making**

Table A shows the most frequent nutrition and ingredient claims consumers said they look for on food packages (generally the front of packages) according to a 2020 survey conducted by FMI-The Food Industry Association, a supermarket industry organization. Interestingly, the majority of concerns are food factors to avoid rather than what to include.

Various foods and nutrients go in and out of favor, running the gamut from “miracle cures” to “evil curses.” In the late 1980’s, oat bran was the miracle cure, and fat became the evil curse. In the mid-2000’s, the antioxidant-rich value of blueberries and pomegranates (along with major marketing efforts) catapulted these fruits and their products into shoppers’ carts for their purported potential to prevent heart disease, cancer and diabetes. Trans fat, the by-product of the hydrogenation of vegetable oils, became the “evil curse” of the 1990s and was banned from most foods by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 2018. Hydrogenated oils have now been replaced by the once-feared palm and coconut oils. Now, extra protein makes snack food look healthy, while low-carbohydrate and gluten-free claims promise weight loss and healthy intestines.

Although the underlying facts are valid, the problem with the cure-or-curse mindset is that we can become so focused on obtaining or avoiding a certain nutrient that we lose perspective.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Claim</th>
<th>% Consumers Seek Claim</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low sugar</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low sodium</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole grain</td>
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</tr>
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<td>High fiber</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low calorie</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>No trans fat</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low carbohydrate</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No fat/low fat</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

https://med.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Nutrition/Realities_of_Nutrition_(Morrill)/8%3A_From_Farm_to_Table/Chapter_22%3A...
Table A. Top-ranked Nutrition and Food Claims Consumers Seek


For example, you can now find dozens of foods made with pomegranate and blueberry. Yogurts are flavored with pomegranate juice and cereals contain dried blueberries. If you decide to substitute pomegranate juice for a daily serving of orange juice, you've just dropped an important source of vitamin C and folic acid from your diet. Pomegranate juice contains neither in significant amounts.

How about avoiding gluten, the protein in wheat? There are plenty of breads, cereals, cookies and crackers with "gluten-free" labels. However, in order to create acceptable flavor and texture, manufacturers must use an assortment of highly refined, non-wheat flours which contribute little nutritional value besides calories. If you have a true gluten-intolerance, including celiac disease, a healthy diet must include other non-wheat whole grains to replace healthy fiber, B-vitamins, and several minerals wheat flours contribute. Some gluten-free cereals are now enriched, like wheat flour, but the selection is limited.

Balancing our choices over several meals, even over several days, protects us from the single nutrient focus. Blueberries are a great fruit, but so are oranges, kiwi fruit, and bananas. Palm oil is a problem, but we can handle a little of it in a commercial oatmeal cookie when we choose to use an olive oil-based dressing on a salad.

Table B. Estimating Fat and Sugar Budgets

To calculate the maximum fat and sugar recommendations in grams, first decide what would be a “healthy” weight for you. To estimate your grams of sugar limit, divide your weight by 3. To estimate your grams of fat limit, divide your healthy weight by 2. If you lead a sedentary life, subtract 10 grams from the fat total.

For example:

150 lbs = 50 grams of sugar per day

3 (approximately 10% of calories)

150 lbs = 75 grams of fat per day

2 (approximately 30% of calories)

If sedentary, 75 grams - 10 = 65 grams fat per day

Dealing with “Fun Foods”

The preparation and eating of a good diet can and ought to be fun and pleasurable. The trick is to control what I like to call the “problem potential” of foods such as candy, pastries, soft drinks—“fun foods.”

Fat and sugar are the chief contributors to the “problem potential.” Both can either add excessive calories or fill us up so we don’t feel like eating foods that make important nutrient contributions. Excess calories from any source promote the development of obesity, cardiovascular disease, and cancer.
Current recommendations call for fat to contribute about 30% of our total calories. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2020-2025 recommends that added sugar contribute no more than 10% of total calories. Other health experts say it should be no more than 6%. For the typical adult, these translate to 50 to 70 grams of fat per day and 40 to 60 grams of added sugar (see Table B for how to estimate your personal fat/sugar limits).

Once you have a perspective on your fat and sugar “targets,” you’re equipped for comparison-shopping. Knowing these numbers allows you to decide whether the Hershey’s Milk Chocolate bar staring you down in the grocery checkout line is really “worth” the 13 grams of fat and 24 grams of sugar it will take out of your fat and sugar targets.

Another factor in controlling the “problem potential” is to consider how much of a food you will eat over a period of time. The special sale on the 15-ounce Party Size bag of Doritos from the end-of-aisle display brings 120 grams of fat into your household (grams of fat or sugar/serving x servings per container). If your daily fat target is 60 for the day and you single-handedly eat the whole bag in a couple of days, its “problem potential” is high. If, on the other hand, you stretch the chips out over several days or share them with others, their “problem potential” is greatly reduced.

There are of course many issues relating to nutrition labeling. But the concepts of evaluating nutrient value, avoiding single nutrient decision-making, and assessing “problem potential” will provide good starting places for nutritionally sound shopping.

Judy Fitzgibbons is a retired registered dietitian living in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. She has worked in the field of nutrition for 40 years, spending 10 of those writing the syndicated column On the Label, and 16 years as an in-store dietitian for Hy-Vee, Inc., an Iowa-based regional supermarket chain. She helped customers find foods that fit their individual nutrition concerns through supermarket tours, nutrition workshops, and personal nutrition coaching. She also helped store departments showcase their healthy food options with recipes and food demonstrations.