What's In A Label?

A Lot More Than You Think

By: Deborah Liv Johnson

Have you ever considered the notion that the fewer the ingredients, the less likely you are to ingest a long list of additives? Although it may seem daunting to wend your way through the supermarket reading food labels, knowing exactly what you're eating is an important step to good health.

Salt

The American Heart Association® and The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention™ (CDC) list the recommended adequate amount of daily sodium as 1,500 milligrams or less. The tolerable upper level for daily sodium is 2,300 milligrams, but the average daily sodium intake of North Americans, ages 2 and up, is 3,436 milligrams. To function, the human body only needs 180 to 500 milligrams of sodium per day.

Tomato soup is almost as American as apple pie, but the nutrition facts on the label tell the typical story of excessive salt. A one cup (eight ounce) serving of canned tomato soup may contain as much as 1,334 milligrams of sodium. Throw in a grilled cheese sandwich and the sodium content could easily surpass 2,000 milligrams, and that's just lunch. What about the other two meals and snacks you may consume throughout the day?

The CDC warns that high levels of sodium in processed and restaurant foods contributes to increased rates of blood pressure, heart attack and stroke. To really know how much sodium is in your food, you have to read the labels. Whenever possible, choose the low sodium options and try flavoring your foods with herbs and spices.

Yogurt

Generally speaking, yogurt receives high marks as a "healthy choice" food. Dairy-intolerance not withstanding, six ounces of non-fat Greek yogurt can pack a nutritional punch: at a fairly modest 100 calories, it contains a surprising 18 grams of protein, 20 percent of recommended daily calcium, 65 milligrams of sodium, 6 grams of sugar, no fat and the ingredients are Grade A pasteurized skimmed milk and live and active yogurt cultures — no fillers, no corn starch, no added sugar.

Buy fruit-flavored yogurt, however, and the protein content drops, the sugar increases and you may get more ingredients than you bargained for. Two six-ounce containers of fruit-flavored yogurt made by different companies may look similar and weigh in at 160 to 170 calories apiece, but their protein and sugar content are vastly different: 14 grams of protein versus 4.9 grams; 19 grams of sugar versus 27 grams — not to mention the long list of ingredients, in addition to non-fat milk, fruit and live and active yogurt cultures. Be aware of which brands provide the best nutritional value, pay attention to their ingredients and choose wisely.

Keep Track for a Week

If you have no idea how much sodium, sugar or fat you consume daily, keep track of your eating habits for one week, writing down everything you eat. Read the labels of anything packaged or processed, and if you can't find the nutritional information, do a little research on your home computer. Once you are aware of what you are consuming, take the time to discuss it with your physician and come up with a plan to adjust your eating habits. Remember, fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, fish and unsalted nuts are the foundation for healthy eating. Bon appétit!

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