Fruit juice is no longer on the all-you-can-drink list.

Even if it’s 100% pure, not-from-concentrate, nutrient-packed OJ, juice is liquid calories. And liquid calories don’t register with your brain’s satiety center like the calories in solid foods do. That means you don’t compensate for them by consuming fewer calories later in the day.

So unless you’re that rare person who’s trying to gain weight, it makes sense to aim for just one cup (8 oz.) of juice a day. But one cup of what?

The juice aisle is awash in claims. Some juices “help nourish your brain.” Others “support a healthy digestive system.” Still others “promote a healthy heart.” And what to make of “super juices” like pomegranate, blueberry, açai, and goji berry, which have started to elbow their way in—healthy reputations in tow?

Here are some examples of what to look for…and what to ignore.

The information for this article was compiled by Danielle Hazard.

Fiber

“A good source of fiber to help support a healthy digestive system,” says Welch’s Fiber 100% Grape Juice.

But juices (even orange juice with “lots of pulp”) have little or no naturally occurring fiber. (Exception: prune juice has 2½ grams of fiber per 8 oz. glass.)

So Welch’s—and other companies—add malto-dextrin, a chain of sugars not quite long enough to be a starch. Some dextrins are absorbed poorly enough to count as fiber on nutrition labels.

But according to a 2005 report by the National Academy of Sciences, “there are no human studies to support a laxative benefit from ingestion of indigestible dextrins.” And more recent studies have been inconsistent.

So how can Welch’s claim that its juice supports a healthy digestive system? Simple. According to the Food and Drug Administration, that’s a claim about a nutrient that affects the “structure or function” of the body, so it needs no evidence.

Likewise, Sunsweet PlumSmart Plum Juice Extra with Fiber needs no evidence to show that it has fiber “for your heart and digestive system.”

Prunes are dried plums, and many people swear by prune juice to stay regular. But that doesn’t mean that plum juice with added dextrins has the same impact.

As for PlumSmart’s other claims: who knows if its fiber “increases the level of beneficial cultures in your digestive system, and fortifies the body’s natural defenses”? Or if its vitamin C “helps protect your body against infection”? And do its fiber, magnesium, and potassium “contribute to keep your digestive system healthy and in balance”?

Good questions. No answers.

Bottom line: You’re better off getting your fiber from whole grains, fruits, and vegetables.
Omega-3s

Omega-3 fats are multitaskers.

In Tropicana Healthy Heart with Omega-3—which has 50 milligrams of EPA and DHA from tilapia, sardines, and anchovy in every 8 oz. glass—they’re clearly supposed to protect your heart.

That’s a claim backed by solid, though not conclusive, evidence (see cover story, Oct. 2007). And although Healthy Heart’s 50 mg of omega-3s is much less than the 2,000 to 3,000 mg you’d get in a 6 oz. serving of salmon, the juice may appeal to people who don’t eat salmon.

In Minute Maid Omega-3/DHA Pomegranate Blueberry 100% Fruit Juice Blend, on the other hand, the omega-3s are supposed to “help nourish your brain.” Each glass has 50 mg of DHA from algae. While the evidence that omega-3s can boost IQ or help ward off Alzheimer’s is promising, it’s still preliminary. But that’s no problem, because Minute Maid needs no studies to back up a structure-or-function claim like “helps nourish.”

In fact, this “pomegranate blueberry” juice blend (which has more apple and grape juice than pomegranate or blueberry juice) is loaded with empty structure-or-function claims: vitamin C “is highly concentrated in brain nerve endings,” vitamin E “may help shield the omega-3s in the brain from free radicals,” choline and vitamin B-12 “play a role in brain and nervous system signals.”

Bottom line: Any juice that contains DHA (from fish oil or algae) may help protect your heart. The evidence on omega-3s and the brain is less certain.

Glucosamine

An 8 oz. glass of Minute Maid Active has 750 milligrams of glucosamine, to “help protect healthy joints,” as the label says. Only one problem: in the largest study done so far, it didn’t.

That’s one reason why the word “arthritis” doesn’t appear on the label. Instead of light or diet juice, stretch your favorite juice by mixing it with seltzer or ice water.

Light

If juices have too many liquid calories, why not dilute them with water and add a calorie-free sweetener to restore the sweetness? That’s pretty much what you get in light juice beverages, drinks, or cocktails (though some contain added vitamins).

But there’s a hitch: Most lights are sweetened not just with the safe artificial sweetener Splenda (sucralose), but also with poorly tested acesulfame potassium.

Both sweeteners show up in juice beverages like Tropicana Light ‘n Healthy (42% juice), Welch’s Light (40%), Ocean Spray Light (27%), Langers Diet (25%), and Diet Ocean Spray (7%).

Among the few exceptions: Mott’s Plus Light Apple Juice Beverage (50% juice) and Sunsweet PlumSmart Light (35%) use only Splenda.

The 60 calories in a cup of Mott’s Plus Light trump the 120 calories in a glass of its regular apple juice. And the 60 calories in a cup of PlumSmart Light beat the 180 calories in a glass of ordinary prune juice. (Whether even full-strength plum juice has the same impact on regularity as prune juice is unclear, though.)

Bottom line: To avoid the poorly tested artificial sweetener acesulfame potassium, check the ingredients list, not just the front label. Instead of light or diet juice, stretch your favorite juice by mixing it with seltzer or ice water.

Not Imported

“Doesn’t contain any imported juice,” says the sticker on the carton of Florida’s Natural Home Squeezed Style Orange Juice.

If you’ve always assumed that your OJ came from Florida or California, check the small print. Orange juice and orange juice concentrate are often imported from Brazil or Costa Rica. Does imported juice have more pesticides? There are no good data.

Bottom line: If you’d prefer to not buy imported orange juice, check the label. The country of origin is usually near the ingredients list.

Glucosamine flunked its largest study on joints.

One of the few “light” juices with no acesulfame potassium.

There’s better evidence that omega-3s can protect your heart than your brain.

BRAND-NAME RATING

 Omega-3s

Not Imported

“Doesn’t contain any imported juice,” says the sticker on the carton of Florida’s Natural Home Squeezed Style Orange Juice.

If you’ve always assumed that your OJ came from Florida or California, check the small print. Orange juice and orange juice concentrate are often imported from Brazil or Costa Rica. Does imported juice have more pesticides? There are no good data.

Bottom line: If you’d prefer to not buy imported orange juice, check the label. The country of origin is usually near the ingredients list.
Antioxidants

“Tropicana Antioxidant Advantage gives you the essential nutrients needed to maintain your body’s first line of defense—a healthy immune system,” says the carton.

In fact, any food with just about any vitamins or minerals can say that they “maintain,” or even “boost,” the immune system. That’s because it’s a no-scientific-evidence-necessary structure-or-function claim.

Higher doses of vitamin E (200 IU a day) may boost immune function in the frail elderly, but every 8 oz. glass of Antioxidant Advantage has only 30 IU. Plus there’s no good evidence that vitamin E—or the other antioxidants that have been added to Antioxidant Advantage (vitamin C and selenium)—can help the young mother on the carton.

And at first glance, it may look like Welch’s Fiber 100% Grape Juice “helps promote a healthy heart” because it has “more than twice the antioxidant power of orange juice.” In fact, the bottle carries a check mark from the American Heart Association only because—like all juices—Welch’s Fiber is low in saturated fat and cholesterol.

It’s not clear whether antioxidants translate into a lower risk of heart disease. In fact, too much vitamin E (400 IU a day or more) may slightly raise the risk of dying.

Bottom line: Ignore antioxidant claims.

Blends

Minute Maid Breakfast Blends may look like a mix of orange and other juices. But the Tropical flavor is just 44% juice, the Citrus is just 41% juice, and the Berry is just 32% juice. In other words, the blends are anywhere from 56% to 68% high fructose corn syrup, sugar, and water.

Likewise, Chiquita Pineapple Mango Guava, a “flavored five juice cocktail blend from concentrate,” is only 20% juice. The remaining 80% is high fructose corn syrup and water.

Look for the “% juice” declaration just above the Nutrition Facts panel. But even when it’s 100%, you still have to look at the ingredients list. In some cases (Dole Pineapple-Orange-Banana and Pineapple-Orange-Strawberry and Tropicana Orange Tangerine and Orange Pineapple, for example) you’re getting only the juices that appear in the name. But in other cases, 100% juice blends dilute their expensive juices with cheap, nutrient-poor juices.

A few examples:

■ Tropicana Pure Triple Berry has more apple juice than strawberry purée or blackberry or raspberry juice.

■ Dole Berry Blend has more grape and apple juice than blackberry, blueberry, and strawberry juice.

■ Ocean Spray Cranberry & Pomegranate has more grape and apple juice than cranberry and pomegranate juice.

Bottom line: Check above the Nutrition Facts panel to find the “% juice.” Then check the ingredients list to see whether there’s more (nutritionally weak) apple, grape, or pear juice than mango, blueberry, or other juices that figure prominently in the name.

Blends often contain more grape and apple than the featured juice.
Exotic Fruits

Want to make a million dollars?

1. Find an exotic fruit, preferably from an ancient culture. Already taken: açai (pronounced ah-SIGH-ee) from Central and South America, goji (GO-jee) berry from China, and pomegranate from the Middle East and South Asia.

2. Turn it into juice, either straight or mixed with other (i.e., cheaper) fruit juices.

3. Attribute extraordinary healing powers to your juice. Already taken: açai is the “fountain of youth,” goji berry is “the most potent anti-aging solution on earth,” and pomegranate lets you “cheat death.”

4. Get Whole Foods to carry it and charge what the market will bear. Don’t be shy. Start with four or five times what regular juices go for.

What will your customers get for their money? An assortment of antioxidants and phytochemicals, just like they’d get from any fruit juice. But whether that makes the juices healthier is unclear. At least that’s the case with two of our three examples:

- Açai juice. Not a single published study has looked at whether people who drink it are any healthier than people who don’t.
- Goji berry juice. Same as açai juice.
- Pomegranate juice. In a small, preliminary study, UCLA researchers found that rising PSA levels slowed substantially in 38 of 46 men with prostate cancer who drank 8 oz. of pomegranate juice every day for three years.¹

(Rising PSA, or prostate specific antigen, can indicate a growing tumor.) But there’s a catch: The study didn’t include a placebo group, so there’s no way to know if the pomegranate juice was what slowed the rise in PSA levels.

Researchers are also looking at the effect of pomegranate juice on dental plaque, cholesterol levels, and blood flow through the heart.

And what about blueberry juice, which is starting to show up on supermarket shelves? While blueberry extract seems to help rats find their way through mazes, it’s too early to say if blueberries—or their juice—can prevent memory loss in people.

**Bottom line:** Don’t count on açai or goji berry juice to boost your health. And research on pomegranate juice and blueberries is still preliminary.


---

Calcium & Vitamin D

Minute Maid, Tropicana, Florida’s Natural, and other companies market orange juices that contain about as much calcium (350 mg) and vitamin D (100 IU) as you’d get in an 8 oz. glass of milk.

The calcium can help you reach the latest daily targets (1,000 to 1,200 mg). But men who drink calcium-fortified OJ should think twice until studies clarify whether more than 1,200 mg a day raises prostate cancer risk.

The added vitamin D is a nice bonus, but 100 IU is just a fraction of the 1,000 IU that middle-aged and older adults should get. (Most researchers agree that the current Daily Value—400 IU—is too low.)

**Bottom line:** Juices with added calcium and vitamin D can help you reach your daily targets, but aren’t good for men who could exceed 1,200 mg of calcium a day.

---

Plant Sterols

“Proven to help reduce cholesterol,” says the big print on Minute Maid Heart Wise Orange Juice with plant sterols. In fact, the Food and Drug Administration has approved a “reduces the risk of heart disease” claim for foods that have at least 0.4 grams of plant sterols per serving.

You need two of those servings a day—0.8 grams of sterols—to make a decent dent in your cholesterol. But that’s okay, since a glass of Heart Wise has 1 gram. In a Minute Maid study, two (8 oz.) glasses a day of a “reduced-calorie orange juice beverage” with the same amount of plant sterols as Heart Wise lowered cholesterol by 9 percent.

**Bottom line:** Foods that contain plant sterols (phytosterols) can help lower cholesterol.