MEMO FROM MFJ

You Can't Tell a Food by its Label

Reading a food label can be like deciphering an insurance policy—tough, but necessary.

That's because companies are always making claims designed to make you think their foods are terrific for you. Some of my favorites:

■ **0g trans fat**—It implies that a food is healthy, though some, like Edy's Dibs frozen snacks, are loaded with saturated fat.

■ **6g whole grain**—You'll find it on foods like Sundried Tomato & Basil Wheat Thins, which are mostly refined flour.

■ **Now helps support your child's immunity**—This bogus claim appeared on Kellogg's Cocoa Krispies until the San Francisco City Attorney objected.

■ **Omega-3 fats**—Companies use it to imply that their eggs are good for your heart, despite the eggs' slug of cholesterol.

■ **Naturally flavored**—It's typically in small, skinny letters near a word in bold type ("Strawberry," for example). And it often means that the food contains little or none of the ingredient.

■ **All natural**—You'll see it on some foods that are made with (non-natural) high-fructose corn syrup.

After years of inaction, the Food and Drug Administration is finally going after some dishonest labels.

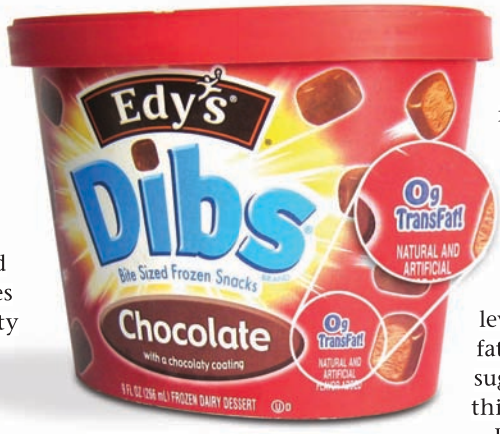
In 2009, for example, the FDA stopped misleading cholesterol-lowering claims on Cheerios. And it triggered the collapse of an industry-wide labeling scheme that awarded a "Smart Choices" logo to Froot Loops and other sugary cereals. We expect the FDA to expand on that activism in 2010.

Photo: Stephen Schmidt.

Lies aside, the FDA should require labels to disclose other information: Nutrition Facts labels should reveal how much added sugar is in a serving of food. High-sugar foods shouldn't be allowed to carry a "healthy" claim. Ingredient lists should disclose the percentages of key ingredients, as the European Union requires. And the FDA should ban ingredient lists that use almost-unreadable, small, skinny, capital letters on a non-contrasting background.

What's more, the FDA should require manufacturers to put key nutrition facts on the front of the package.

The British government is encouraging companies to display—on front labels—color-coded dots (red, amber, or green) signifying high, medium, or low levels of fat, saturated fat, sodium, and added sugars. We need something similar here.



"0g Trans Fat!" misleads shoppers when every serving of the food contains 80 percent of a day's saturated fat.

But there's no need to wait for the government to grind out new regulations. You can avoid deceptive labels right now...by buying more foods that have no labels—fruits, vegetables, and bulk grains, seeds, beans, and nuts.

Michael F. Jacobson, Ph.D.
Executive Director
Center for Science in the Public Interest

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Rogues' Gallery

For more examples of deceptive labels, see our *Food Labeling Chaos* report (cspinet.org/chaos).

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