

Put a Label on It

By Reg P. Wydeven
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For her New Year's resolution, my wife decided she is going to help our family eat healthier. Through her school district, she was able to sign up for a class to learn about the CHIPs diet. When I learned of this, I told her I supported it fully and immediately went out and bought several bags of Doritos.

It turns out that the CHIPs diet has nothing to do with cool ranch tortillas, but rather is an acronym that stands for the Complete Health Improvement Program. According to its website, CHIP is a lifestyle enrichment program that's designed to reduce disease risk factors through the adoption of better health habits and lifestyle modifications. CHIP is intended to lower blood cholesterol, hypertension, and blood sugar levels, promote weight loss through improved dietary choices and enhanced daily exercise, and decrease stress.

As part of her class, my wife's teacher took her students to Festival Foods to teach them how to shop for healthier foods, especially by focusing on nutrition labels. Thanks to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, we're all going to have an easier time interpreting these labels.

The FDA hasn't made any significant changes to the nutrition labels appearing on the back of food packages for 20 years. In response to requests from consumers and the evolution of knowledge about nutrition, the agency recently sent guidelines for new labels to the White House. While it is uncertain when the new rules will be released, the FDA has been working on improved labels for the last decade.

According to a recent study released by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, more people are consulting nutrition labels than ever before. Because consumers are becoming more sophisticated in what they look for in their foods, nutrition labels need to clearly display this information.

One change many consumers are asking for is clearer measurements. Most foods list ingredients in terms of grams. Other than 'Breaking Bad' fans, most Americans aren't comfortable with the metric system. Alternatively, the FDA is looking at using teaspoons, which is easier for consumers to gauge.

Because whole grains are a desired ingredient, consumers are also asking for nutrition labels to reflect the actual percentage of whole grains contained in the food. Many manufacturers indicate their products contain "whole grains," while there may only be a small percentage actually in the food.

Advocates are hoping that serving sizes will be more uniform. Some manufacturers use very small serving sizes so their foods look like they have fewer calories. Consumers also hope the number of calories will be more prominent on labels. Nutritionists anticipate that naturally occurring sugars will be distinguished from added sugars.

Finally, there is talk about a snapshot label being printed on the front of the food package to give shoppers a quick look at the vital nutritional information about the food.

While I think easier-to-read labels is a great idea, much like with hot dogs, I'm not sure I really want to know exactly what's in the food I love.

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