

Food for Thought

By Reg P. Wydeven
November 17, 2007

Last week, our city rec-league basketball season started. We only had six players show up to face the defending champs, who had ten guys. We were only down by four at halftime. The second half, however, was a different story.

As they continued to play a high-tempo game, we had several selfless players fighting to sit out. The court suddenly seemed longer and the hoops higher. My lung capacity shrank as our deficit grew. We ended up losing by 24, but we all survived, so it was a moral victory.

I woke up the next morning and sounded like a bowl of Rice Krispies as I snapped, crackled and popped my way to the kitchen. Over the noise, I tried to tell my wife that I needed to get into better shape. One way was to start eating better, and the Food and Drug Administration is now trying to help me.

In several previous articles, I've written about my son's food allergies and my excitement over the FDA's requirement that food labels must indicate if they contain common allergens. The FDA is now looking at placing more nutritional information in plain sight on food labels.

The FDA's goal is to use symbols on the front of food packages to convey nutrition information in a clear and concise way without forcing shoppers to examine the typical fine print on the back of packages. Some food manufacturers and retailers have already begun labeling foods with symbols to indicate their nutritional value.

For example, PepsiCo uses a "Smart Spot" symbol on Diet Pepsi, Baked Lay's potato chips and other products. Some supermarkets have implemented their own rating systems, ranging from a five-star rating to traffic light system that uses green, yellow and red lights to reflect low, medium or high rating for fat, salt and sugar content.

Because of the wide variety of symbol systems with different criteria and eligibility requirements, the FDA is looking at a uniform system. To aid in the process, the FDA held a two-day hearing to collect comments on nutritional symbols on labels from the food industry, trade groups, watchdog organizations, and medical experts. The agency is looking for input on whether the symbols will result in shoppers eating better and their impact on sales.

In addition to the FDA, the Environmental Protection Agency is getting into the act of making food safer. The EPA completed a two-year study to examine the fumes produced by microwave popcorn. The report, titled "Emissions from Cooking Microwave Popcorn," determined what gases are produced in what amount when consumers make microwave popcorn at home. The report was not intended to study the health effects of these fumes on consumers, however.

The chemical diacetyl, which is used as a flavoring agent in microwave popcorn, has been linked to cases of bronchiolitis obliterans, a rare life-threatening disease often called "popcorn lung." The disease most commonly affects popcorn plant workers, but some in the medical field fear it could impact consumers.

As a result, Weaver Popcorn Co. and ConAgra Foods, Inc., the nation's largest microwave popcorn manufacturer that makes Orville Redenbacher and Act II brands, have changed their recipes to remove diacetyl.

After our crippling defeat, I thought it might be healthier for me to buy a bag of popcorn and just watch our games. After learning of the EPA's report, now I'm not so sure.

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