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## Food Labels 101

Ever been confused when attempting to decipher a food label? You're not alone, but hopefully this information will make the process a little less daunting.

Obviously the ideal scenario would be one where we rarely, if ever, bought anything in a package. When it is necessary to buy processed foods? At least try to stay away from the major brands. Because of cost reasons, they will rarely use quality ingredients, and almost never organic ones. Remember, their job is to persuade you to buy their product, not to make you healthier.

\*avoid anything with artificial sweeteners. These chemicals are very harmful to your health (i.e. Splenda, Sucralose, Aspartame, Nutra-sweet, Equal, etc). If you can't find it in your kitchen, you shouldn't be eating it. It was made in a laboratory and is not a food.

\*avoid high fructose corn syrup (Aka: Dextrose, Fructose - Corn syrup solids, Multidextrin, ) Avoid these like the plague! You would not believe how many products list this as an ingredient. It's in everything from hard candy to "health" bars to barbeque sauce to bottled tea and soft drinks, salad dressings, etc. Look for organic fruit sugar instead of HFCS.

- Avoid Hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated oils, or trans fats. The bad news? It's in almost every processed or packaged food available, because it helps to make it "shelf stable." The good news? There are more and more products being introduced without it. Some larger companies are even changing the recipes of their products to accommodate those of us who have stopped buying their products.
- Do not eat anything that says, "fat-free" or "sugar-free." Usually these products will make up for the loss of fat or sugar with chemicals and other unnatural additives and preservatives.
- Be very skeptical of words like "healthy," "light," "low-carb." These words do not make the product a healthful one.
- Words to look for are "100% organic," or "kosher." These words should get your attention, but do not rely on them exclusively. Be sure to read the label thoroughly and remember that the ingredients are listed in order of quantity. If the first ingredient is organic sugar, it is still probably not the best choice. Excessive sugar, organic or not, is not healthy anyway.
- No MSG (Monosodium glutamate) it is a toxic flavor enhancer. It is in everything from canned soups and sauces to chips and fast food.
- No artificial colors. They are poison and are in many food staples. (Gatorade anyone?)
- No Soy Protein Isolate (common in "food bars"). In processing, a petroleum solvent similar to gasoline is used.

- Avoid Carrageenan. It is a binding agent commonly found in ice cream and baked goods. It is classified as a tumor promoter.

These are just a few tips to guide your decision making, but a good rule of thumb is that if you can't make it or pronounce it, you probably shouldn't eat it. The ingredient list should be short, sweet, and easily recognizable.

Although reading food labels may feel like navigating a live mine field, it will get easier with practice. If you're not sure about an ingredient, just use your common sense, and what you learned here to make an informed choice. You will discover that the more you read labels, you will become wise to a lot of the tricky wording that is used and you will be able to protect your health and that of your family's, by honing in on the quality products that are available.