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Food labels contain plenty of information and being able to comprehend what it actually means will enable you to make healthier shopping choices

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Decode the fine print

YOU ENTER the departmental store and smack in front of your face is the shelf of potato wafers. You pounce on that crunchy pack of chips and stash it away for the evening, to be had while you are watching that cricket match. Maybe you'd switch over to some homemade popcorn if you had any idea how calorie laden that snack was! Perhaps if you read the label you would know how many calories, fats and nutrients you are wolfing down with each crunchy bite.

THE PACKAGING TRAP

Examining the package of any food product can be a frustrating experience. The ingredient list is usually hidden under a flap in print so tiny that it can be read with only a magnifying glass. Some ingredients are straightforward, like carrots. Some may seem straightforward, but actually contain harmful ingredients the manufacturer doesn't want you to know about. A good example of this is 'nature identical flavours' in soups. It seems like a safe ingredient unless you know that it means there are no natural flavours and chemicals are the main constituent. Other ingredients may sound like Greek and you don't have the foggiest idea of what they are, like BHT.

The main purpose of food labels is to sell the product, not tell you what's in it. Companies that sell vegetable oils as 'cholesterol free' use this as a 'pick-me-up' trick. This declaration is redundant since cholesterol is not found in vegetable products anyway.

Beware labels such as 'all natural' or 'extra calcium'. Just because the pack says it, it doesn't mean that it's nutritious. A certain drink labelled as 'citrus' which probably contains 100 percent of a child's daily Vitamin C requirement, might not be a good buy. "It contains a very small percentage of actual fruit juice and packs a whopping amount of sugar, in the form of high fructose corn syrup, in every serving. It's basically fruity sugar water," says Dr Sushma Sharma, consultant, Nutrition Foundation of India. Stick to natural colours. If the snack comes in colours not found in nature — neon green, arctic blue, bright orange, shocking pink, rainbows, polka dots, or stripes — consider a piece of fruit instead!

ONE SERVING IS ENOUGH

First things first! All the information on the label (amount of calories, fats etc) is based on a single serving, so it is vital to know the size of a serving and how many servings the pack contains. For most potato chips, a 'serving' is one handful. You may be shocked to know that this meagre amount contains about one eighth of the daily fat allowance, and five per cent of the maximum amount of salt to be eaten in a day.

If you are watching your weight, the number of calories really count. In case you eat two servings, do multiply the calorie count by two to see how much

you've consumed. Many foods that market themselves as being low in a particular ingredient are high in calories — diet food like sugar-free ice cream for instance. "While the sugar content in them might be low, these are full of cream. The calories from fat are very high," says Honey Khanna, chief nutritionist, Max Healthcare.

WATCH THE FATS

Most often the fat content on the label refers to the 'total fat'. It is important to know how much of this fat is saturated as this is the 'bad fat' and should be kept at a minimum. Too much saturated fat has been shown to increase the risk for heart disease. Our bodies can make all the saturated fat we need, so we don't need to eat much of it. "For a product to be considered 'low' in saturated fat, it must have 1 gm or less. But most products have much more," says Dr Sushma. Thus, as a general rule of thumb, select prepared meals that contain 4 grams of saturated fat or less and side dishes and snacks that have 2 grams of saturated fat or less.

Studies show that trans fats increase bad cholesterol and lower good cholesterol — a double whammy in other words. Food generally high in trans fats include margarine, butter, cake mixes, soups, fries and frozen food. So eat as little as possible of this.

"Don't be fooled by a label that says 'zero trans-fat'. This just means that the percentage is closer to zero. This is only a way of attracting people to the product and may be false information," says Jayashree Joshi Eashwar, co-founder and COO, Dubdengreen — the organic store and more Labels can be deceptive.

STAY AWAY FROM NAMKEENS

Patients with high blood pressure should keep a watch on the labels of food like chips, crackers, biscuits, mixture, cheesings, etc. These are high in fats and carbs and do not make a mention of the nutrients. "That's because they practically have no amount of nutrients in them," says Honey. Do you reach out for that packet of digestive biscuits to up your fibre count? While you may think it is a good idea, this is more of a fantasy

than a reality. "Many of these fibre enriched biscuits are likely to have trans fats which we miss reading on the label. Instead pick crackers low in chemicals over fibre rich biscuits," says Jayashree.

SALT AND SUGAR COUNTS

Look for the value of sodium on the label. This tells you the salt intake per serving. For a product to be considered "low sodium" it must provide no more than 140 mg per serving. Most snacks and namkeens are high in sodium. As a rule of thumb, healthy main meals should provide no more than 600 mg sodium and packaged food no more than 400 mg.

Packaged juices are popular and taste good, so it's just too bad that most are plain sugar water. "They claim to contain some fruit juice, but if the list of ingredients contain the terms fructose, glucose, or artificial flavour, beware," says Geetika Ahluwalia, chief dietician, Delhi Heart and Lung Institute. She recommends we look for juice cartons that contain 100 percent juice, but reminds us, "All juice boxes, even if 100 percent pure, lack the fibre found in whole fruit. It is best to eat fruit rather than its juice." Moreover juices spell disaster for diabetics.

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DID YOU KNOW?

TAKING medicine or supplements with hot drinks can make them ineffective, because the heat destroys the ingredients, warn scientists at the University of Maryland.