

New Food Labels and the Magnificent Seven

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It has been over a year since the new food labels have appeared on food packaging. Most of the attention was focused on the nutrition facts section, which replaced the old nutritional information label. This month, we are focusing on the descriptive words used on the front of packaging. To the casual observer, they have not changed much. However, with the new food labeling guidelines from the FDA, which number over 1,000 pages, the words commonly used to describe (or hype) food are now defined by our government. Today we will review these adjectives and what they now "officially" mean. Then we will use them to describe what I call the Magnificent Seven; that is, the seven claims the government allows the food industry to make about the diet disease connection.

1. Contains, good source, or provides: Foods that use these words must have between 10 and 19 percent of the daily values of the specific vitamins, minerals, or nutrients being described per single serving.
2. Excellent source, high, or rich in: When these words are used to define what is in a food, the substance in question must contain no less than 20 percent of the daily value per single serving.
3. More: This means that the food being describing exceeds the normal or standard food daily value of a substance such as a vitamin, mineral, fiber, protein, or carbohydrate by 10 percent. In many cases, the substance being described has been added to the food, resulting in a "fortified food."
4. Extra lean: Animal meat from any source that uses this term cannot contain more than 95 mg of cholesterol, 2 gm of saturated fat, and 5 gm of total fat per 3.5 ounce serving.
5. Lean: Animal foods that use this word cannot contain more than 95 mg of cholesterol, 4 gm of saturated fat, and 10 gm of total fat per 3.5 ounce serving.
6. Light or lite: There are six approved definitions.
 - Can be used to describe the color of the product.
 - Can be used to describe the texture of the product.
 - The food must have one third fewer calories than the standard referenced product.
 - The food must have 50% less sodium than the referenced product.
 - The food must have 50% less fat than the referenced product.
 - If describing a main course, the food must meet the low fat definition for a multiple serving meal.

Finally, whenever "light" or "lite" is used, it must be accompanied by what it is describing, such as light sodium. The only exception to this rule are foods which have used light traditionally to describe their color, such as light brown sugar.

7. "Free," "no," "without," or "zero": These words may be used when calories, cholesterol, fat, salt, saturated fat, or sugar are absent or present in only minute amounts. To further define minute, if a beverage contains no more than 4 calories, the words "no calories" may be used on the label. Another example is if a product states it is fat free or sugar free, it can contain no more than 0.5 gm of fat or sugar per serving.
8. "Fewer," "less," or "reduced": These words can be used if a product contains 25% less calories or 25% less of a substance or nutrient when the product is compared to the normal standard referenced food. For example, a reduced fat cookie must contain 25% less fat than the regular product.

9. "Low," "little," or "low source of": These words can be used if there are no more than 40 calories per serving, or 20 mg of cholesterol per serving, or 3 gm of fat per serving, or 140 mg of sodium per serving. Low fat can also be used to describe a main course or entire meal as opposed to the above description for a single serving of an individual food. To be able to say a meal is low fat, no more than 30% of the calories can come from fat.
10. "Low saturated fat": A low saturated fat product may not contain more than 1 gm of saturated fat per serving and no more than 15% of the calories per serving can come from saturated fat.
11. "Very low sodium": When the words very low sodium are used, the product can contain no more than 35 mg of sodium per serving.

The Magnificent Seven

With the new food labeling and regulation guidelines, our government has determined that there are seven health benefits manufacturers can place on the labels of foods (thank goodness there are more than seven benefits from all foods, or we would be in deep trouble). These seven benefits are:

1. Calcium and osteoporosis. A food must contain at least 200 mg of calcium per serving to make the claim that it helps prevent osteoporosis.
2. Cancer and fat. A food must not contain more than 3 gm of fat per serving to claim it helps prevent some types of cancer. Meat and fish packages can make this claim if they meet the extra lean guidelines described above.
3. Cancer and fiber. A fruit, grain, or vegetable that has no more than 3 gm of fat per serving and contains at least 10% of the daily value of fiber can make the claim that consuming it will help prevent some types of cancer.
4. Cancer and fruits and vegetables. Fruits and vegetables can claim to reduce some types of cancer if they contain less than 3 gm of fat per serving and at least 10% (without fortification) of the daily value of vitamin A, vitamin C, or fiber. Ironically, vitamin A or vitamin C out of a bottle, which may contain hundreds or even thousands of times the RDA, cannot make this claim.
5. Heart disease and fiber. Fruits, grains, and vegetables that have no more than 3 gm of total fat, 1 gm of saturated fat, 20 mg of cholesterol, and contain at least 0.6 mg of soluble fiber can claim to reduce or help prevent heart disease.
6. Heart disease, cholesterol, and saturated fat. Food manufacturers can state a food can help prevent heart disease if it contains no more than 3 gm of total fat, 1 gm of saturated fat, and 20 mg of cholesterol per serving. Meat and fish can make this claim if they fall under the extra lean guidelines described above.
7. Hypertension and sodium. Foods that contain less than 140 mg per serving of sodium can make the claim that their consumption will help prevent hypertension.

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