



All's Wellness

By Barbara Ruhs



Fad-free Food Labeling

Retail dietitians can help shoppers make sense of it all.

Labeling claims like “organic,” “natural” and “gluten-free” bombard consumers as they walk the grocery aisles. In addition, the hype over genetic labeling continues to gather steam as companies publicize the removal of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) from their products, hoping to boost consumer confidence and grow sales.

Do customers know what these terms mean and are they making informed purchasing decisions, or are they simply making food decisions based on what they hear in popular culture and media?

This was the primary question posed to me as a dietitian and expert panelist for USDA’s 2014 Agricultural Outlook Forum and Food Dialogues discussion “Nutrition: Who is shaping America’s eating habits?”

In honor of National Nutrition Month in March, I decided to focus on nutrition labels and some of the most popular health claims seen in store aisles:



Seek out dietitians’ expertise and let them help you guide shoppers toward better health.

Organic Regulated by USDA, organic products must meet federal standards for production, processing and certification. Organic standards forbid the use of synthetic pesticides, fertilizers, sewage sludge, irradiation and GMOs. Meat must come from animals not treated with growth hormones or antibiotics; they must be fed 100 percent organic feed with no animal byproducts and, in most cases, must have access to the outdoors.

Organic doesn’t necessarily mean better nutritional quality. In fact, a recent Stanford University study said there’s no significant nutritional difference between conventional fruits and vegetables and their organic counterparts.

Natural A recent National Grocers Association survey indicated that 80 percent of consumers consider health claims “almost always” or “sometimes” when considering purchase of a new food item, so it’s no surprise that “natural” claims are popping up on food products everywhere. But the term isn’t clearly defined; 1993 FDA policy says that a natural claim may appear on food labels if used in a truthful manner and the product doesn’t contain added color, artificial flavors or synthetic substances.

Partially hydrogenated oils, high-fructose corn syrup and other ingredients that dietitians recommend avoiding can be found in many all-natural products. “Natural” often is up to the manufacturer’s discretion, so consumers need to read ingredient lists to make informed choices.

Gluten-free In August 2013, FDA ruled that products labeled “gluten-free” shall contain no more than 20 parts of gluten per million. The popularity and sales growth (projected in the billions) of the gluten-free food trend continues, even though less than 6 percent of the population medically requires a gluten-free diet due to celiac disease or gluten intolerance.

Many erroneously assume that gluten-free means healthier, and many naturally gluten-free products now sport a label claim to capitalize on the trend. Gluten is a protein found in wheat, barley and rye and their relatives, including some oats and other grains. Naturally gluten-free carbohydrates include corn, quinoa, amaranth, rice and potatoes.

GMOs We take medications and supplements formulated in a lab and don’t think twice about it. However, when it comes to using technology to improve our food supply, there’s extreme resistance to biotechnology.

It takes years of traditional plant breeding to optimize crop quality, and we’ve found more efficient methods using biotechnology to produce better nutritional quality and sustainable products. They’re intensely tested for safety, and limited (to eight crops in the United States) in the food supply — making it possible to identify them on food labels as ingredients or avoid them by choosing USDA organic-labeled products.

Educating shoppers on how to use food labels and decipher health claims to make better nutritional choices is an important part of any supermarket dietitian’s job. Seek out their expertise in stores and let them help you guide shoppers toward better health. **PG**

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