



Extension News Column

*University of Alaska Fairbanks, Cooperative Extension Service, www.uaf.edu/ces/
fycit@uaf.edu, 907-474-5211, FAX 907-474-6885*

Contact: Debbie Carter, information officer, 907-474-5406, dscarter@alaska.edu

Author: Roxie Dinstel, Tanana District Extension Faculty, HHFD, 474-2426,
rrdinstel@alaska.edu

Re: Pinching Pennies column

Read the labels. That has been the consistent advice from all the experts as you shop for groceries. However, when those labels are confusing, confounding or even misleading, what do you do?

Grocery store shelves are increasingly stocked with items that contain all different types of labels and claims. “Natural,” “Organic,” “Local” and “Free Range” are just a few of the labels seen on products, often with a higher price tag than its traditional counterpart. With all of these terms, shopping can get very confusing.

One-third of all new food and beverage products launched in 2009 made “natural” claims according to the Mintel Global New Products Database. This increase in “natural” foods has many people believing these products are “health” foods and even has some believing that it has magical powers. However, even though the product may look, sound and even taste healthy, it does not mean that it is. In fact, the term “natural” has no real definition. As of right now, the USDA allows food to be labeled natural if it contains no artificial ingredients or added colors and is minimally processed.

With this rule, many products can fall under the “natural” claim. For instance, products that contain high fructose corn syrup or partially hydrogenated oils could be labeled as “natural.” Yet, many of us know that added sugars and fats are not exactly healthy. It is also important to note that natural does not mean organic. Organic food has been certified as meeting USDA standards, with the use of artificial hormones and even genetically modified organisms can be labeled natural.

If you are confused about the natural claims, be sure to read other types of labels that are on our foods. All foods are labeled with both an ingredient label and a nutrition facts label. Learning how to interpret these labels will help you sort out any unfamiliar terms.

The ingredient list on a food label is the listing of each ingredient in descending order of predominance by weight. The ingredient list can also help you identify “hidden” ingredients, like added sugars, whole grains and trans fats. Watch for different types of sugars, such as brown sugar, honey, corn sweetener and dextrose. In fact, any word on the label that ends in -ose is a sugar, such as dextrose, sucrose and lactose. Whole grains are

healthier, so watch for these words: whole wheat, brown rice, oatmeal and whole oats. Though trans fats are listed on the nutrition label as a percentage, watch for the words “partially hydrogenated vegetable oil” in the ingredients.

The nutrition label lists the size of the serving, number of servings per container, total calories and calories from fat. Remember the nutrition label is based on the serving size. So, if there are two servings in the package and you eat the whole package, you need to double the calories and nutritional values listed on the label.

Reading the nutrition label can help you to increase the healthy nutrients that you want your family to eat, like calcium and fiber, and limit nutrients that can be unhealthy, like fat, saturated fat, cholesterol and sodium.

And reading food labels can allow you to compare foods that you are going to buy and choose foods that are healthier than others.

From the amount of calories, fiber and total fat grams to the food's ingredients, the food label is your key to the nutrition information in the foods you provide to your family.

The best thing to do when shopping is read the labels very carefully. Look at the ingredients as well as the Nutrition Facts label to help you decide if the product is right for you. Ignore unsupported claims such as “natural” and “local.”

Roxie Rodgers Dinstel is a professor of extension on the Tanana District Extension Faculty. Questions or column requests can be e-mailed to her at rrdinstel@alaska.edu.