

Episode 049: What's In A Food Label? What You May Not Know About Processed Foods...

This is The TD Fitness Podcast with Coach T, episode number 49.

Welcome to The TD Fitness Podcast, giving you ways to live a healthy lifestyle without giving up the things that make life worth living, and now your host certified health coach and personal trainer, coach T.

Hey, TD Fitness Family, this is Coach T, welcome back to TD fitness. This is episode number 49 entitled What's in a Food Label? What You May Not Know About Processed Foods, so we see them all the time nutrition labels on the back of products, healthy and purity claims I'll say on the front of products and packaging, but what does it all mean, where does it all come from?

I want to chat a little bit about that. I'll let you know now too that there's a freebie for this episode. It's from the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and it's a food labeled tip sheet so stay tuned I'll be sure to tell you where you can get that, where you can download it, it's the freebie associated with this episode and I'm happy to give that to you, because there's some really good information in there.

Let me start by saying this, there are two types of labeling that we're gonna discuss, there's the labeling on the front of the package and then there's the rear, the labels on the rear or underside of packaging, those are the ones we're more familiar with typically, the nutrition labels, that's typically what I refer to those to.

Let's talk a little bit about the front labels though, so some common terms you may see, things like the term natural, or low-fat, or low-sugar, precision nutrition the course that I'm enrolled in now, it's a nutrition course to help me better serve you, some examples that they use on the packaging, things like buttery, or no artificial ingredients, or a nutritious source of fiber, or made with real fruit, or part of a healthy breakfast, all of those types of things that you see on the front, those are all classified as kinda front labeling, and each of those things means something but they may not actually mean what you think they mean.

For example, the term natural, or all natural, doesn't necessarily apply to all of the ingredients in that food, okay? Low-fat, that maybe good, but how big is the recommended serving, because a serving could be pretty low in fat, but a typical serving may be much less than you would normally eat in a standard sitting. Low sugar, what exactly does that mean? Low, compared to what?

So all of these things have certain connotations, certain meanings, or implications, but they may not necessarily mean, or resonate, with us the way that we typically think. In some ways they don't really mean anything, but they do trigger thoughts or feelings and those thoughts or feelings influence your perception and likely your decision to buy, things like cholesterol-free, or fat-free, well, you have to ask, well, did the product ever have cholesterol in the first place? I mean, if I bought a bag of salad that said fat-free, okay, that may look good but guess what salad really shouldn't have fat in it, right? I mean, if it's just a bag of lettuce.

Things like not from concentrate, that doesn't necessarily mean that it was freshly squeezed, it just means that its not from concentrate, so these are the types of things that I want you to

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be aware of, and just keen to some of the tactics, the procedures, sales, or products, things like that, things that they use to try to get us to think that foods are much more healthier than they are.

A lot of times the data that maybe intended to help really isn't really that helpful at all, right? So things like 20% of the recommended daily allowance of sodium, okay, what does that mean to me? What we really want to know are things like is this gonna make my blood pressure go up? Is it gonna make my cholesterol level go up? Will it cause me to gain weight? You really just wanna know whether or not you should eat it, right?

So it's important to understand that the industry provided labels, those things on the front of packaging, and this is an important point, and probably the biggest takeaway for the front labeling, the things on the front of packages, those are placed there at the manufacturer's discretion, okay, front labeling is optional, so think about that for a second, think about the fact that you really don't have to put as a manufacturer, as a food producer, you don't have to put anything on the front, so if you put something on the front, as a consumer, what do you think is going to be put on the front of that package? It's probably going to be something to help it sell, so look at it from that lens.

Understand that things written on the front of the package or the front of the food that you buy, it's not mandatory, so think about why it's actually there, okay? Is it there to improve your health, or to give you better information, or is it there to help sell the product. Now, rear labels on the other hand, the nutrition info, those are somewhat of a different story, because they are legally required to be there with an exception, you know, if you're a small company that doesn't generate a lot of income then you don't require a nutrition label on your product, but everyone else you have to have that nutrition label with the nutrient info.

Now, in the US, that's governed by the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act and it's overseen by the FDA, so some things to look for, things like ingredients, nutrition data, nutrition info, the amount of calories, what the serving size is like, the recommended daily allowance, so let's talk about a couple of these. Let's start with ingredients.

So ingredients are listed in order by proportion of weight, so whatever is the heaviest ingredient in that package that's gonna be listed first, so the things you see first are most prevalent, if you pick up a drink and the first ingredient is water, that's probably a good thing, if you pick up a drink and the first ingredient is sugar, that's probably a bad thing, because that means most of it is sugar, there's a higher percentage of sugar in that.

Now, where does the data that's in the food come from? Okay? It could be that it comes from or is derived from an in-house lab, so some of the larger companies just do it all in-house, they do it themselves. It could be that new products that haven't been tested are derived by the ingredients in proportions that are estimated based on existing data, so data is pulled from different places to determine the ingredients in some of these products.

When you think about the nutrient information on the back, the nutrient numbers, not the ingredients, but the numbers, that's based on the USDA nutrition database, and that is pretty accurate, okay? So you can rest assured that when you see that something contains a certain amount of percentage, or I'm sorry, a certain percentage of protein, of fat, of carbohydrates, and even the micro-nutrients, things like vitamins and minerals, those things are pretty spot on because they come from the USDA nutrition database, okay?

Now, calories, everyone tends to focus on the calories and the nutrients, right? I think a lot of time we do ourselves a disservice because we focus less on the actual food itself, and the

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eating habits, so there is more to it than calories, I've talked about this in the past, again, I go back to some of my precision nutrition studies, one of the examples they use is that folks that eat nuts, or avocados, those things have a higher ... they're more calorie dense because they are composed of fats, primarily, but that's okay because most of it is good fat.

You think about calorie free soda on the other hand which is low in calories, that's not necessarily good for you, not as good as nuts or avocados, so just because something is high in calories doesn't necessarily mean that its bad for you. Something to keep in mind.

But really, the thing to remember is that foods are more than just calories, there's a lot more to it than that, think back to episode number 28 that was, Calories and Weight-Loss, What to Really Expect. The Eat Less Move More Fallacy. You can go back and check that out at td.net/028. In that episode I explain that weight loss doesn't just come from burning more calories than you consume. It's not that simple.

Your metabolism, your activity level, your digestive efficiency, calories consumed, the calories that you consume that are not absorbed by the body, all of this goes into the equation, and then your body adjusts based on how much you're consuming, so it's kinda a moving scale, so calorie counting is not necessarily the way to determine what is the most healthy style of eating.

Remember, calorie counting is a man-made way of trying to quantify eating, okay? We defined what a calorie is, and we determined to use that as a measurement for how much energy something provides, how much energy a good source provides, calorie counting can be helpful but that is only a part of an overall healthy diet. The numbers aren't necessarily always accurate, and food again, are more than just calories.

Now, some of the other data on the nutrition label, you may have seen the term RDA, or recommended daily allowance, what is this anyway right? Well, that is the amount of a nutrient, or calories, per day considered necessary for the maintenance of good health, and that's set forth by the Food and Nutrition Board of the National Research Council, and National Academy of Sciences, so RDA is the recommended daily allowances, they are associated with just about every vitamin, mineral, macro-nutrient you can think of, and that's based typically on a 2000 calorie diet.

Another term you'll see is DV, or percent daily value, so for example, 15% means that 15% of the total, let's just say calcium for example, that you should consume per day is found in that product, whatever that product is, or a serving of that product I should say, and again, that's based on a 2,000 calorie diet.

We've talked in the past about what a calorie is, and again, I won't go beyond saying that it's not all about the calories, but calories are an important consideration so all of this you have to look at kinda holistically. There are a number of things you can look at on that nutrition label to give you some good data, some good insight, and that's really why I wanted to provide the freebie that I'm giving you with this episode, the freebie associated with episode number 49 here.

Because there's some good data in there on what to look for in nutrition labels and how to use that information. Different people look for and get different things from labeling, a lot of people aren't even sure what to look for, or what to prioritize, that may be the case for many people actually, and a lot of times it just takes too long. I mean, you run into the store to grab some groceries and you don't really take the time, or have the time, to flip everything over and look at the nutrients on the back, the ingredients, and things like that.

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I get it, you know. We're all overcome by life in some form or another, but the takeaway is you can't really go wrong with incorporating more whole foods, more unprocessed foods, in your diet because they typically don't have nutrition labels right? You know where they come from. Okay?

Circling back though I'm gonna jump more into that in a second, but kinda wrapping up the first part of this episode, some of the takeaways, labels provide some transparency, that's a good thing, remember though that all front labeling is optional, not mandatory, the detailed information on the backside, the nutrition label, is mandatory, but when you think about that front label ask, who put this front label description here? Is it accurate?

I would approach those front labels with some skepticism, I do approach them with skepticism. Again, nutrients labels on the back can be very helpful in making healthy decisions, sometimes the numbers themselves, the calories, may not always be accurate but at the end of the day, labels, just like everything else, are tools, so I want you to understand the tool you're using. Determine what's important to you.

Did the doctor tell you to watch your sodium, to watch your cholesterol, to eat heart healthy food, if you go in without an idea of how to prioritize, then you're gonna fall for all the eye-catching labels, but if you understand what your priorities are, and where you need to focus your efforts, then those labels can be very helpful, the nutrition labels on the back, so take your time, alright?

If you can't look at the packaging for everything just start with a few things you buy, remember, we're getting better step by step, a little by little, as time goes on. Don't get too hung up on the numbers just stick to whole foods, if there is a question, or as close to it as you can.

Now, some people say ... I want you to think about ingredients, don't think about calories, and I would agree with that to an extent, but I would also take it a step farther and say think about foods, not just the ingredients. I go back to the fact that if we seek whole, real, unprocessed foods first, those things that don't come with labels, apples don't come with labels. Stick to the outside aisles of the grocery store, that naturally takes you to the produce sections, those are good strategies, and that kinda leads us into what I want to talk about, the second part of this discussion, and that is how does that nutrient information relate to processed foods?

Now, when we think of processed foods we think of things like potato chips maybe or white rice, but did you know that granola bars are processed? Maybe you did know that, alright, maybe that's not that difficult to figure out, but what about canned meats, like tuna and salmon. Maybe you didn't know that they're processed foods, and what about a bagged salad, that bag salad that I mentioned, that's processed food too, okay?

The reason why is because The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics defines processed foods as any food that has been deliberately changed in some way before consumption, now that's a pretty broad definition, certainly one that most of us wouldn't normally think about, but processing includes things like cooking, canning, freezing, packaging, adding nutrients, typically through some type of fortification, even preservation, think beef jerky.

So, there's obviously a spectrum though from minimally processed foods to highly processed food, so let's talk a little bit about that, so minimally processed foods things like the bagged salad, or cut-up fruits and vegetables, sometimes we'll buy the sliced apples, or diced onions to help with cooking, or a sliced pineapple, or boiled eggs, eggs that are already boiled, you

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can get those, roasted nuts, those are minimally processed foods, they haven't really been altered a whole lot, nothing's really been added to them, they've just been changed, typically to make things easier for us, or make them more convenient.

And then, you have the most heavily processed foods, things like the frozen TV dinners, right? Or the frozen pizza, or cookies, even deli meat is pretty processed, and then in between you have the whole spectrum. You have the frozen, the can, and the jarred foods, you also have foods that have additives such as sugars, or spices, or food coloring, or preservatives, now again, some processing is not all that bad, because there is a benefit in convenience of preparation, again, the diced onions, it's just easier for me to buy a small thing of diced onions than it is for me to stand over the cutting board and cut onions up until I start crying, literally.

The downside is that too much processing means that you lose some nutritional value, or even worse, that there are things that have been added that are bad for you, so the key is in finding the balance between those two, between the convenience side, and between the health side.

You want to balance how often you eat those types of processed foods, so how do you do that?

The first thing you want to do is recognize processing, and hopefully, that's what this podcast and this YouTube video will help you to do, now you know hopefully that anything that has been altered before it gets to you has been processed in some form or another, but there are different levels of processing, but if you can recognize that it's pretty close to its original form, it looks pretty much the same like you would get it out in nature for example, then that's a lightly processed, or minimally processed food, on the other hand, you don't really see cookies growing on trees, right? Because they're not naturally occurring and this is where the nutrition label comes in, okay, going back to some of the things we talked about a few minutes ago in the beginning of the podcast.

The nutrition label will tell you, if it isn't already obvious, it will tell you and give you insight into how processed a food is, how much it has been processed, so you want to look out for things like added sugars, things that come to mind are yogurts that already have the fruit in them, typically, they will add more sugar as well to make it sweeter. Tomato sauce, this is one a lot of people don't realize, but there is a good amount of sugar in a lot of the jarred or canned tomato sauces that you buy. If you see something that ends in ose, or ose, dextrose, fructose, if you see those in the ingredients, that contains sugar, okay?

If it says sugar or syrup in the ingredient name, things like raw sugar, brown sugar, cane sugar, obviously that contains sugar. Juices that are made from concentrate, or end in A-D-E, or ade, then those have added sugars too, and even seemingly natural sweeteners such as nectar and honey, those are, again, different forms of sugar, so you want to be on the lookout for things like that.

As of this past July, July of 2018, the grams of sugar is something that is mandatory for nutrition labeling so you should see on all nutrition labels how many grams of sugar are included in a serving of that good. Sodium is also an additive that is often times put into foods for preservation, canned foods come to mind, canned foods are particularly high in sodium, so if you do have blood pressure issues than that's something you want to watch out for.

Fats. Fats are added sometimes for flavor, sometimes for consistency, sometimes for texture, even a prolonged shelf life, so be cognizant of that as well, but again, I go back to the fact

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that the business of our lives sometimes calls for processed foods, but there's a difference between a bagged salad or frozen fruits, and frozen veggies, there's a difference between all that good stuff and things like potato chips, and cake batter boxes, so look for foods that are not processed first, then okay, maybe some minimally processed first, and then you want to limit the highly processed foods in your diet, okay?

So that wraps up our food label and processed food discussion, again, just a reminder, there is a freebie for you to download here, it is The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics food label tip sheet, and you'll find some helpful tips and food label images on there, on that handout, so you can see what's going on, what they're describing, it's only a page or two, and you can find that at TDFitness.net/049download.

You can also find the show notes for this episode at TDFitness.net/049 and there you'll find a bunch of referenced links. I do have quite a few external links for you and some internal links to other podcasts or blogs that I've written on the TD Fitness site, so check that out, check out the show notes at TDFitness.net/049.

As always, I want to remind you too that if you want to learn more or take the next step in improving your diet you can always opt in to try my 10 day healthy habit challenge, you can just go to TDFitness.net/10habits. That's the number 10 habits, and if you are really ready to change for the better the Fit Life Program may be for you, and you'll here just a short outro clip on the Fit Life Program right after this podcast. You can find out more about that at fitlifeprogram.com or TDFitness.net/fitlife. As always folks, I thank you so much for tuning in, you guys are the best listeners and viewers in the world and I really appreciate your time and all that you do, so have a blessed one, Coach T, out.

Why did I create the Fit Life Program? I wanted to provide something that wasn't just for weight loss, not just for feeling better, not even just for better health, I wanted a more complete solution, and I also wanted to make it sustainable. It's not just about starting something or sticking with it for a month or two, healthy living, which includes fitness, nutrition, and a healthy mindset is about practicing healthy habits, consistently, not all the time because no one is perfect, but practicing those healthy habits more than you are right now, that's how change begins, and that's how healthy living continues.

Find out more at fitlifeprogram.com or TDFitness.net/fitlife