

The importance of Reading and Understanding Food Ingredients

Do you read food labels when grocery shopping? Every time? Occasionally? Never? A research paper from the National Center for Biotechnology Information performed a survey stating that, “52.5% of consumers do not read the ingredients’ list written on the food label.” This statistic doesn’t surprise me because taking the time to read the ingredients on food labels can seem unimportant. Most people I speak with only read the number of calories and grams of sugar found in a specific product. While this can be important in a few instances, reading and understanding all of the ingredients in products will be much more beneficial, especially when trying to avoid specific foods or ingredients. The 4 things to pay attention to when reading food labels are: **misleading marketing, additives and preservatives, reading all the ingredients,** and **different or unfamiliar names.**

Misleading marketing: Marketing is meant to sell products. The problem is that it can also be deceiving. Don’t assume that because you see the word **natural** or **organic** on the package that they mean the same thing. For labeling purposes, **natural** products means that it has no artificial colors, flavors or preservatives. It doesn’t refer to the methods or materials used to produce the food ingredients. However, **organic** products are held to a much higher standard. For example, organic products cannot use:

- 1) synthetic fertilizers or sewage sludge to add nutrients to the soil
- 2) most synthetic pesticides for pest control
- 3) irradiation to preserve food or to eliminate disease or pests
- 4) genetic engineering (GMO) to improve disease or pest resistance or to improve crop yields
- 5) antibiotics or growth hormones for raising animals

This is why it is always best to buy organic when possible.

Additives and preservatives: Food additives are substances added to food to preserve flavor or enhance taste, appearance, or other sensory qualities. Preservatives are added to foods to help prevent or slow spoilage due to bacteria, mold, fungi or yeast, as well as to slow or prevent changes in the food's color, flavor or texture, delay rancidity, and maintain freshness. These have no nutrient value and can cause harmful side effects in some individuals. A common preservative we

all know are nitrates/nitrites which are found in processed meats, including bacon. Fortunately, there are companies that produce nitrate/nitrite free meats, including bacon, that my family and I eat on a regular basis. The trick is to read the entire label as most additives and preservatives are at the end of the ingredient list.

Reading all the ingredients: Ingredients are listed by quantity; from highest to lowest amount. Some say that a good rule of thumb is to scan the first three ingredients, as they make up the largest part of what you're eating. I disagree with this; read the entire label to know exactly what you are eating. Additives and preservatives are usually listed last, meaning they make up the smallest amount. However, as stated in the previous paragraph, they can have significant effects on our health.

Different or unfamiliar names: When reading all the ingredients, you will be surprised to learn how much sugar, sweeteners, milk and wheat (gluten) can be hidden under different names. Many ingredients can be by-products, extracts or derivatives of an ingredient you are trying to avoid. Two examples are casein and whey. Both are proteins found in milk and can create problems for some people with milk sensitivities. Milk, wheat (gluten) and sugar are complicated because there are many different or unfamiliar names for them.

Reading and understanding food ingredients takes some effort but the benefits dramatically outweigh the inconvenience. It can be the difference between knowing if a specific food or ingredient is the cause of a nagging symptom or not. It will provide you with peace of mind knowing what you are eating, and prevent frustration and disappointment by avoiding accidental sabotage, especially if you are avoiding specific groups of foods. Become familiar with the ingredients that are in the foods you eat. Take the time to read the label and look up words you don't know or understand. Your body and mind will thank you for it.

If you would like a user-friendly list of different or unfamiliar names for milk, wheat/gluten and sugar, [click here](#).

For a list of common food additives and preservatives, [click here](#).

For in-depth research publications discussing additives and preservatives and their harmful effects; use the links below.

FOOD PRESERVATIVES AND THEIR HARMFUL EFFECTS

FOOD ADDITIVES AND PRESERVATIVES AS SLOW POISONS

THE HARMFUL EFFECTS OF FOOD PRESERVATIVES ON HUMAN HEALTH