Misleading Food Packaging

“Buyer Beware” can be a very important motto when making large purchases such as a house or car, but what about when you’re buying a food item that costs just a few dollars? If you don't like a product, you don't buy it again and you end losing just a few dollars. However, if you DO like a product and it has wonderful nutrition claims, you feel like you've hit the jackpot. But, have you?

There are many products that are marketed in fancy packages with great health claims- but are they actually providing you good nutrition? Is the bag of heart healthy granola full of oats or is the majority of it puffed white rice coated in sugar and high fructose corn syrup?

Nutrition labels are often a form of foreign language for many people, and rightfully so. Companies rely on the fact that most consumers will only glance at the nutrition label and are more likely to read the health catch phrases on the front of the product. Many of the claims companies make about their products are loosely regulated and can be misleading. Your dollar, not your health, is typically the priority of most companies.

With all of the misleading food packaging on grocery store shelves, how is it that we can find the healthier items?

1. Shop the Perimeter

This is where you will find most of the whole foods that don’t have a package, because there is no need for one. There is no ingredient list, because an apple is an apple and an orange is an orange. Buying frozen vegetables or fruits (without added sauces or sugar) can be a great way to add them to a meal or smoothie. Using whole foods more often in your diet will help you get the vitamins and nutrients your body needs. Not only are these foods the most nutritious, they are usually the foods naturally lowest in fats and calories.

2. Read the Label

Nutrition labels are meant to be a guide and tool to inform the customer about the nutrition in a food item. Pay careful attention to the sugar and sodium content of particular products that claim to be healthy. Sugar and salt are naturally fat free and many “health” foods will add to improve the product’s flavor without adding fat grams (since the diet wave in the ‘90’s taught people to fear fats). “Healthy” cereals, yogurts and canned fruits are common places where you might find increased sugar content.

3. When in Doubt- Check it Out
We shouldn’t have to research food products to find out whether or not they are being truthful in their marketing, but until product labeling regulations change, you might just have to exercise the ‘ol fingertips and do some internet research. Make no mistake, you WILL be fooled by product packaging in the search for a great health product, but I suggest checking out how your new favorite ranks. Is it a hero or a zero? This will help you decide whether it gets your next dollar or if you need to try out a different item on your next grocery trip.

As challenging as grocery shopping might already be, it can improve your health by looking a little closer at the food you’re buying. It might take you some time to get used to the little bit of extra work it takes, but it will be worth it. The good news is that before long, you will become a food label detective and you’ll become an expert at catching the food criminals! While it’s not something you can put on your resume, it is something that will be personally worthwhile for the changes it creates in the way you feel and your overall health.