

TOPS Helps Decipher Food Marketing Gimmicks

Written by Kimberly Greene
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MILWAUKEE, WI – Supermarket shelves abound with “value-added” foods, offering innovative twists on traditional products. Cereals that make you lose weight, yogurt that eases digestion, and chocolate calcium chews that replace milk – the options can seem endless and overwhelming. The difficulty with value-added foods is that, much of the time, they actually aren’t all that valuable, according to TOPS Club, Inc. (Take Off Pounds Sensibly), the nonprofit [weight-loss support](#) organization. “You may find yourself purchasing foods that offer a very slight nutritional advantage that’s not worth the extra money or indulging in a perceived health benefit that has not proven to be effective,” says Katie Clark, M.P.H., R.D., C.D.E., Assistant Clinical Professor of Nutrition at the University of California - San Francisco and nutrition expert for TOPS.

Here are a few value-added food industry favorites - and what they do or don’t do:

Juice with Added Fiber While whole fruit is a great low-calorie source of fiber and nutrients, fruit juice packs in the calories and forgets the fiber in the discarded pulp. Fiber-enhanced fruit juice is essentially pulverized fruit with its fiber removed, with a different type of fiber added back in. One cup of orange juice with fiber can boast three grams of dietary fiber per 120 calorie serving. But one orange has four grams of fiber and only 70 calories - a lower-calorie, cheaper option with no processing needed.

Drinks with Vitamins In 2008, the most popular diet soda in the U.S. released its “plus” product, a diet cola with a small amount of water-soluble vitamins added.

Other vitamin-enhanced drink and waters have taken off in recent years, although, according to Clark, “Many are merely overpriced, sugar-sweetened waters with a tad of vitamins thrown in for good measure. Despite the fact that you can get 100% of all the vitamins and minerals you need in a well-balanced diet, a generic multivitamin only costs about four cents a day. Why spend nearly \$3 on a special vitamin drink when water is free and a more comprehensive multi-vitamin is substantially cheaper?”

Immunity-Boosting Foods Lately, there has been a wealth of foods on the market touting

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“immune enhancing” or “pro-immunity” benefits – from yogurts to cereals, drinks, and even frozen vegetable blends. While there is ample data to support the notion that a diet with insufficient nutrients compromises immunity, the opposite does not hold true: eating more nutrient-laden foods has not been proven to increase immunity.

Clark notes, “By eating a well-balanced diet and exercising regularly, you are already maximizing your immune-enhancing behavior!”

Omega-3-Enhanced Omega-3 fatty acids are found primarily in fish, fish oil, and, to a lesser degree, in flax and flaxseed oil, canola and soybean oils, and walnuts. Omega-3s have numerous heart-health benefits, including reducing cardiovascular disease risk, lowering blood triglycerides, and lowering blood pressure. The American Heart Association recommends a daily intake of 1,000 mg of EPA + DHA (two types of omega-3 fatty acids) for people with documented heart disease, equivalent to eating two to three servings of fish per week. Because many people don’t eat as much fish as they should, omega-3-fortified foods, like eggs and butter, can seem appealing. “These foods contain such small amounts of the beneficial fatty acid that you’d have to ingest many portions per day to get the recommended amount,” cautions Clark. “You actually end up losing, calorically.”

The Nutrition Facts panel on one such enhanced omega-3 butter spread reveals it contains only 32 mg of EPA + DHA per each one tablespoon serving.

“If you were to get all of your recommended 1,000 mg EPA + DHA omega-3s from this butter, you would have to eat 31 tablespoons of butter per day (one entire tub), consuming 2,480 calories,” says Clark. “Incorporate more fish into your diet for an effective, comprehensive way to consume more omega-3s.”

TOPS Club Inc. (Take Off Pounds Sensibly), the original, nonprofit weight-loss support and wellness education organization, was established more than 63 years ago to champion weight-loss support and success. Founded and headquartered in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, TOPS promotes successful, affordable weight management with a philosophy that combines healthy eating, regular exercise, wellness information, and support from others at weekly chapter meetings. TOPS has about 170,000 members in nearly 10,000 chapters throughout the United States and Canada.

Visitors are welcome to attend their first TOPS meeting free of charge. To find a local chapter, visit

www.tops.org

or call

[\(800\) 932-8677](tel:(800)932-8677)

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