Name of Resource person:
Dr. K.Aswathy Raveendran

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Understanding Food Labels

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TRANSCRIPT

Hi all,

I'm Dr. Aswathy Raveendran, Associate Professor from the Department of Community Medicine. Today, let's talk about something we see on almost every packaged food product, but often don't spend enough time reading, the food label.

When you pick up a packet of biscuits, breakfast cereal, chips, or a bottle of juice, do you ever look beyond the big words written on the front?

"High in fibre." "Low fat." "No added sugar." "Healthy choice."

These claims can catch our attention. But do we really know what we are buying?

Let's understand our food label.

So, Why Should We Read Food Labels?

The front of the packet is designed to attract our attention. But the ingredients list and nutrition information can tell us a much more complete story.

You don't have to understand every number or every ingredient. Just knowing these 4 important things can help us make healthier choices.

First: Check the Serving Size

Sometimes we see the calories, sugar or fat and think, "That doesn't seem too much." But ask yourself, is that amount for the entire packet, or just one serving? If a packet contains several servings and we eat the whole packet, we need to account for all those servings. So, don't look at the number alone. Look at what that number refers to.

Second: Watch Out for HFSS Foods

Another important term to know is HFSS—High Fat, Salt and Sugar foods.

These include many commonly consumed packaged foods such as chips and other savoury snacks, biscuits and cookies, cakes and pastries, confectionery, and many sugary drinks. Eating these foods occasionally is different from having them regularly. The concern is when foods high in fat, salt or sugar become a frequent part of our diet. So, when you compare products, check the nutrition information rather than choosing only because the packet looks attractive or says "tasty" or "healthy".

Third: Don't Assume Fruit Juice Means Healthy

We often think, "It's made from fruit, so it must be healthy." But there can be a big difference between whole fruit, 100% fruit juice, fruit drinks, and juice-based beverages. Whole fruit provides fibre and usually takes longer to consume. Juice can provide nutrients, but it can also contribute a significant amount of free or naturally occurring sugars, depending on the product and how much we drink. Some fruit drinks may also contain added sugar. So, don't judge a drink just by the picture of fresh fruit on the front. Always, turn the pack around and check the ingredients and nutrition information.

Fourth: Read the Ingredients List

Generally, ingredients are listed in descending order by weight. So, an ingredient appearing near the beginning of the list is present in a relatively larger amount.This is especially useful when comparing similar products. For example, if you're choosing between two breakfast cereals or two snack products, compare the ingredients and nutrition information.

In India, food products are regulated under the food safety framework of the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India, or FSSAI. So, when buying packaged food, look for the relevant food-safety and labelling information and make sure the package is properly sealed and within its date of validity.

At finally, Don't Be Fooled by the Front of the Packet. Words such as "natural," "multigrain," "light," "healthy," or "no added sugar" can sound reassuring. But one claim on the front does not automatically

mean that the product is the healthiest choice overall. Make it a habit to turn the packet around before you buy.

You don't need to spend ten minutes for each product. Even thirty seconds of label reading can help you make a more informed decision.

As a Take-Home Message, here's the 4 simple rules to read food label:

1. Check the serving size.
2. Look at sugar, salt and fat.
3. Check what kind of fruit juice you are buying.
4. Read the ingredients and compare similar products whenever possible.

Because when it comes to food, an informed choice is a healthier choice.

The next time you pick up a packet, before you ask, "Does this look healthy?", ask yourself one more question: "Am I choosing this food because I know what is inside, or because the packet has convinced me that it is good for me?"

Stay informed, read your labels, and make healthier choices, one meal at a time.

Thank you for listening

Signature of the Resource Person

Dr. ASWATHY RAVEEDRAN.K
Regd. No. 91654
Associate Professor
Department of Community Medicine
Sri Manakula Vinayagar Medical College & Hospital
Kalitheerthalkuppam, Puducherry-605 107.

Signature of the HOD

Dr.PREMANANDH.K
Regd. No. 89659
PROFESSOR & HEAD
Department of Community Medicine
Sri Manakula Vinayagar Medical College & Hospital,
Kalitheerthalkuppam, Puducherry - 605 107.