

Food Duped:

6 Ways the Food Industry Is Tricking You

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Is the food industry making you fat and sick? Here's how to stop the cycle.

By Kristin Kirkpatrick, USNews.com

Have you ever been duped? *Really* duped? Think you haven't? Think again! The truth is, you're actually getting duped every time you walk into your local grocery store.

That's right: The one place you go to fill your fridge with honest, good-for-you foods is also the one place keeping you fat and sick. It's not the grocery store's fault, either. It's the guy behind the curtain that supplies the grocery store – the food industry. It has spent billions of dollars in marketing tactics and techniques to confuse you into thinking that you're getting really healthy food,

when most of the time, you're not. Today, it's time to stop the cycle once and for all. Here are the top five front-of-package phrases and foods that have been throwing you off.

1. Multi-grain products or products “made with whole grains.”

The benefits of eating [only whole-grain foods](#) are abundant – and include reduced risk of heart disease and diabetes, as well as improved weight control. The unfortunate truth is that even the best-intended shoppers may be buying a product they think is whole grain, but actually isn't. Enter the multi-grain market. A 2013 study from Harvard found that consumers are still very confused when it comes to making the right choice in the whole-grain arena. The basic definition of a whole grain is a grain that keeps all three of its components (the bran, the germ and the endosperm) intact. When manufacturers strip the bran and germ from the kernel, it no longer provides you with the great benefits that are connected with the entire whole grain. In fact, refined grains can wreak havoc on your risk of chronic disease by causing intense swings in blood sugar and insulin. The definition of multigrain, however, means that a product has a “multitude” of grains. It does not mean that all the grains are “whole.” That means you may be buying multigrain bread or crackers thinking it's better for you than it actually is.

Your best bet? Choose breads, pastas, cereals and crackers with a percentage attached to its marketing (such as 100 percent whole wheat) or its labeling (such as the Whole Grain Council's 100 percent whole-grain stamp), and stick with grain products that have less ingredients. This is often a sign that it's more whole than not.

2. Dark chocolate.

Who doesn't love dark chocolate? Imagine the frenzy on the chocolate market when we all found out it was actually good for us! Even heavy chocolate users might enjoy a reduced risk of heart attack and stroke. This translates to more chocolate for everyone, and without doubt, more money in the pockets of chocolate manufacturers. Everyone wins ... right? Not so fast. To find the truth behind this tricky treat, we'll need to go straight back to the research. The benefits we're seeing in research are typically assigned to chocolate with cocoa contents of 70 percent or greater – yet products labeled “dark” chocolate sold in the U.S. can be anywhere from 55 to 64 percent cocoa content. Cocoa, a plant-based food rich in flavonoids, is the star of any chocolate bar. It's the flavonoids (a type of polyphenol) that are the true link to all the great benefits dark chocolate brings, including a boost in heart health. Just like grains, however, the more that cocoa is “stripped,” the less effective it usually becomes. Further, with all the hoopla about dark chocolate, we tend to forget about the fact that it's loaded with sugar and saturated fat.

Your best bet: Don't shy away from products that advertise 70 percent or greater cocoa content. And if a product doesn't define the percentage of dark chocolate contained, call the manufacturer to find out. Also remember that the benefits of chocolate don't require eating large amounts; you can get them through relatively small portions, too. An ounce and a half a day may be all you need to get the taste you crave with the health benefits you're looking for.

3. Products “made with all natural ingredients.”

I recently encouraged a patient to switch from her processed “traditional” peanut butter to a more natural version that contained peanuts and nothing else. Turns out that I never should’ve used the word “natural.” The next week, she brought me the “natural” peanut butter she found at the supermarket. It included the following: peanuts, sugar, palm oil and salt. Natural? Think again. The food industry has been ramping up its “natural” claims for years, in an attempt to have consumers think they’re getting a better deal than they would with a processed counterpart. Natural, as the example above would suggest, is not always better. Sugar – and all the natural forms it comes in – is still sugar, a simple carbohydrate that may be partly to blame for our girth and sickness as a nation. Palm oil is not much better and has been linked to increases in bad cholesterol. Further, because the use of the term “natural” is so hard to define, the Food and Drug Administration hasn’t assigned an official definition to it. The “natural” term will become even more heated as the food industry and federal government attempt to determine if GMOs will fall into a natural category as well.

Your best bet: Consume foods that are truly natural. That often means they contain only one ingredient (like peanut butter made only with peanuts) or fruits, vegetables and nuts.

4. Products made with “no high fructose corn syrup.”

Oh, those poor manufacturers of high fructose corn syrup! Had they known that their product would become no less than the devil’s food, they may have decided to get into some other sugar business. People don’t like high fructose corn syrup, and food marketers are cashing in on that with claims that announce a

product “contains NO high fructose corn syrup.” The problem is, HFCS isn’t the only bad guy on the block, as far as health concerns go. What’s more, the attention on this “bad” food additive has really confused consumers into thinking that all other sugars are just fine. They’re not. A 2014 study found that added sugars increase the risk of death from cardiovascular disease. A 2011 study found that increased sugar in the diet paralleled our rising obesity rates, and a more recent study shows that substituting glucose for fructose in commercial products most likely wouldn’t solve our nation’s weight troubles and poor disease status. The author notes that it’s over-consumption of *any* sugar that causes weight gain – not a particular type.

Your best bet: If you see a product touting the absence of fructose, ask yourself if the claim is nothing more than smoke and mirrors to hide what *other* sugars reside.

5. Products made with real fruit.

Moms, I’m talking to you. Of all the deceptive claims out there, this is the one most of my mom patients are fooled by. This preposterous claim doesn’t hold much merit once you turn the product around and look at the ingredient list. The problem is, most of us are so seduced by the front of the package that we don’t bother to actually see what’s in it. The “made with real fruit” claim made the news in 2012, when a woman noticed that her strawberry snacks lacked strawberries – and that the only resemblance to fruit in the ingredient list was pear concentrate. She sued a large food manufacturer when she noticed it. The “made with real fruit” is simply another way to either be totally duped or feel some sort of justification for that “fruit” cookie or gummy candy you just bought.

Your best bet is buying real fruit. It happens to be in the one place at your grocery store that has no need for labels: the produce section.

6. Foods labeled “less sodium.”

Americans love salt! So much so, in fact, that we’re dying too early. Under FDA regulations, a product can be labeled “less sodium” or “reduced sodium” if it has 25 percent less than the original version. This doesn’t mean it’s low in sodium; it just means it’s less than the original version. Let’s look at a traditional high-sodium food, canned soup, as an example. Let’s also assume you’ll most likely eat the entire can in one sitting. In addition to eating the entire can, we’ll assume you have existing hypertension, kidney disease or diabetes, or you’re over 51 or African American. Under any of those characteristics, your sodium intake should not exceed 1,500 milligrams a day. Now back to our soup example. A popular brand of chicken noodle soup has 690 milligrams of sodium. You’ve just eaten the entire can, so now you’re at 1,380 milligrams. You’re almost done for the day when it comes to sodium. Is the lesser sodium version at 1,035 milligrams really any better? If you’re consuming many “lower in sodium” foods, you could be increasing, not decreasing, your risk for heart attack and stroke.

Your best bet: Stick with whole foods, eat out infrequently and if you’re going to look at the front of the package, look for the terms “sodium free” or “low sodium” as a better option.

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