

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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Clean Food Labels

You may have noticed, as a recent caller to my office did, that the buzz about food labels most recently seems to be 'clean'. Besides washing all the cans and bottles in her kitchen, my caller wanted to know what 'clean food' meant. Are you curious too, or all ready in on this? Hint: don't bother washing those cans!

'Clean' in terms of food labels is certainly the latest new word for attracting consumers. Manufacturers and advertisers are using it more than they use 'organic' or 'natural' now. And people are looking for it. They are buying those products. So it will likely be around for awhile.

What the food industry means when it advertises 'clean' is a food that is as little processed as possible. It has no artificial colors, flavors or sweeteners, no allergens and no synthetic ingredients. How is this different from natural? Not much! There is no legal definition of either word as far as food labels go. So, it's almost impossible to be sure that anything is 'clean' just because the label says so.

If there is nothing legal about it, why is it so popular? Probably it's because people are afraid of anything that sounds 'chemical'. People think they can trust something more, or that it's better quality, if there are no chemical-sounding names on the package.

Most dietitians agree that we would all be better off if we ate more fruits and vegetables. Whether we buy them fresh, frozen, or in a can is not as important as whether we eat them or not. Should we buy them without a lot of added salt and sugar? Most certainly! But foods can still be considered 'clean' even if they have a lot of salt or sugar, oil or butter as ingredients. A banana streusel nut muffin with 500 calories is still not a healthy choice, even if it only has bananas, nuts, oil, flour, sugar, eggs and baking powder and a very 'clean' label!

For part of the year at least we here in Florida actually get more nutrition from our fruits and veggies if we do buy them canned or frozen. When fresh produce is shipped for long distances, and goes through a lot of changes in temperature, it loses vitamins. What looks 'fresh' might have a lot less nutritional value. But frozen fruits and vegetables get to stay in the field until they are fully ripe. They start with more nutrition. Then they are frozen the day they're picked. Once they're in the freezer there is no more loss. They're as good as fresh, unless there's a lot of cheese sauce or salty

gravy, or sugar syrup added to them. Buy frozen if you like it, hold the sauce.

Canned produce is also canned the day it's picked or a day later. Read the labels. Most are simply vegetable, water, and maybe salt. The preservation is the cooking inside the sealed can. Buy canned if you like it, preferably no salt added.

We should be eating more whole grains too, instead of white flour. To turn whole wheat into white flour the outside bran of the wheat grains is rubbed off. White color might make a prettier cake or loaf of bread, but what got rubbed off and thrown away had all the fiber, and most of the vitamins and minerals of the wheat. So all we get to eat is the starch. Enriched flour has some, but not all, of the vitamins and minerals added back. It is still not as nutritious as whole wheat flour. So eat 100% whole wheat bread instead of multi-grain, honey oat, or other fancy name.

It's more important to eat a variety of healthy foods than it is to worry about whether a label is 'clean'. And if you want to go wash the cans in the cupboard, sure, go right ahead!

Here's a cool and easy salad to make ahead when you have a busy evening planned. It uses canned and frozen vegetables. Choose reduced or no salt products for healthier eating. But, please, do eat the vegetables!

Marinated Vegetable Salad

1 (16 oz) pkg California blend frozen vegetables	½ cup chopped celery
1 green pepper, chopped	1 medium onion, chopped
1 (15.5 oz) can dark red kidney beans	½ cup sugar
1 Tbsp flour	1 tsp dry mustard
½ cup vinegar	½ tsp salt, optional

Drain and rinse the kidney beans. Cook frozen vegetables according to package. Cool. Combine sugar, flour, mustard (and salt if using) in small saucepan. Add vinegar and cook while stirring constantly until clear. Cool. Combine all vegetables except beans. Add dressing and toss to mix. Refrigerate several hours so flavors penetrate. Stir beans into salad just before serving. Serves 8.

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