

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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Tricks to Reading Labels

Sometimes, for all of our best intentions, an effort to improve on one part of our nutrition can make another part of it worse. It is tough, trying to balance all the different recommendations, not to mention specific medical diets. If you must limit your carbs, do you increase protein, or increase fat? If you're reducing sodium, how do you keep foods tasting good? How do you make sense of what's on a food label when you're trying to balance a diet. Going to the grocery can be a nightmare for some people! Some just give up in despair. But knowing some tricks to read that label can help.

Here's a recent example that came to my desk. My caller was trying to reduce her sodium intake, a very good idea for most of us! She was concerned that her blood pressure was going up some, and she wanted to avoid medication if possible. So she started reading labels for sodium content, and limiting any foods with sodium. Great!

One of the things she found was that one cup of skim milk had about 100 mg of sodium. She loved milk, and one of her special treats was homemade pudding made with milk. But milk had 'that much' sodium (not really a lot) so she wanted to reduce it. The package of powdered milk had 500 mg. That was much too much to use. So, she looked at the label on her fat free coffee creamer. Aha! Zero sodium, it said! An excellent substitution she thought.

She tried making pudding with half the milk required, and replaced the rest with water and several big tablespoons of powdered coffee creamer. It came out a little soft, but it was acceptable. She thought she had made a great improvement in her diet and still had the food she loved. But she had not.

Do you see where some problems occurred? One was that the information she found about the powdered milk gave her how much sodium in the whole packet, which made 4 cups of liquid milk. If she had looked at the amount of sodium in a cup of milk made from the powder she would have seen that it was just about the same. So hint number one is to always look at the serving size the label uses, and compare it to how much you will use.

The second problem also starts with serving size, but the solution is different. When she read the label on the coffee creamer, it said 0 mg sodium. But in this case the serving size is just one teaspoon. In such a small quantity the amount of sodium is negligible. There's not enough there to make a difference to our bodies, and the label is accurate to say that there is zero sodium.

However, she used a lot more than just one teaspoon to make her pudding, probably 10 or 12 times more. How can you find out how much sodium there would be in that much? You can't unless you're willing to spend a lot of time searching on-line. But you can certainly find some hints in the ingredient list!

Here there were two ingredients – one said 'sodium...' and the other was 'salt'. So there is surely more than 0 mg sodium in a quarter cup of creamer. We can't tell how much there is, but it is surely there.

And that ingredient list showed other problems as well. The main ingredient was corn syrup solids, or sugar. And the next several ingredients were hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated oils, including palm kernel which is one of the less healthy oils. So by using creamer, she was still getting sodium, but with an added amount of extra sugar and unhealthy fats. So hint number two is to take a look at the ingredient list when the nutrient facts box doesn't give you all the information you need. This caller would have been better off using plain skim milk to make her pudding.

Here's a healthier mac & cheese recipe. By using fat-free evaporated milk and cream cheese you'll get the thick, creamy taste of whole milk without the calories. For extra color stir in some diced tomatoes just at the very end.

No-Cream Creamy Mac & Cheese

3 cups uncooked whole wheat macaroni	1 Tbsp margarine
2 Tbsp all purpose flour	1 can 12-oz fat-free evaporated milk
½ tsp salt	¼ cup fat-free cream cheese
4 oz (1C) shredded 50% reduced fat cheddar cheese	1 tsp sweet paprika

Cook macaroni according to package directions. Drain. While macaroni is cooking melt margarine in large saucepan. Add flour and stir to remove as many lumps as possible. Gradually stir in milk. Stir constantly until mixture is smooth. Stir in salt, cheddar cheese and paprika. Stir until cheese melts. Remove from heat and stir in cream cheese until sauce is smooth. Stir in macaroni. Serves 8.

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