

## Pernicious Posers

*Beware of nutritional wolves in sheep's clothing*

By Susan Frick Carlman October 15, 2008

For a function that's vital to our survival, eating can get pretty complicated. The state of nutritional research seems to change daily, and it can be hard to keep up. But adhering to a few basic principles can help, such as keeping processed foods to a minimum in the diet. Remaining mindful of portion proportions is also wise.

Still, a trip to the grocery store or a meal out can befuddle even a well-informed eater. There are plenty of foods that present themselves as sensible, healthy choices even if they're not.

The Sun checked in recently with Naperville registered dietitian and author **Christine Palumbo**, and she shared some perspective on a few of these nutritional wolves in sheep's clothing.

### **Fortified water**

Bottled water with vitamins or other dietary staples added to it is no way to ensure a balanced diet. If you're thirsty, go for good old H<sub>2</sub>O.

"The best place to obtain vitamins and other essential nutrients to the body is from whole foods, because they're packaged in just the right proportion, and with other nutrients that maximize their absorption by the body," Palumbo said. "You don't need to spend your hard-earned dollars, especially in today's economy, on vitamin-fortified waters. Spend your money on delicious, in-season fruits and vegetables - especially apples, pears and pomegranates."

There's also the caloric concern to consider. One major national brand of vitamin-enhanced water packs 100 calories in an 8-ounce serving. Trouble is, it's sold in 16-ounce cans and 12-, 20- and 32-ounce bottles.

It's also a good idea to take a pass on fiber-enhanced water, Palumbo said, because it often contains fiber in a form the body can't use.

### **Veggie snack foods**

Whole food again trumps its processed cousins. Studies have not yet established that powdered vegetables are an adequate replacement for the real thing.

"Eat crackers for their whole-grain goodness, not for the approximate half-serving of produce per ounce," Palumbo said.

It's worth noting that vegetables processed into juice are an acceptable exception to the rule, particularly if you choose a reduced-sodium version. Vegetable juice is lower in calories than fruit juice, and it might even help temper a craving for sweets. It can fill you up," Palumbo said. "And there are naturally occurring vitamins and minerals in it."

### **Individual pizzas**

One type of pint-sized pepperoni pie in the freezer case bearing the honest label "Singles" gives the honest truth about calorie and fat counts: 770 and 43 grams, respectively. Ouch. On the other hand, the smallest of the little pizzas in the case gave per-serving data of 370 calories and 19 grams of fat. Here's the rub: to keep intake at that levels, two people have to share that itty-bitty pie.

"If you look at the number of servings per package, it's almost always two, sometimes three," Palumbo said.

### **Fat-free dressing**

Don't allow the appealing numbers on nutritional labels to lull you into a false sense of security. There's more to consider than just fat and calorie counts.

The regular form of one national brand of Italian dressing contains 70 calories and 6 fat grams in a serving, while its "free" version provides 15 calories and, as the name suggests, no fat. Trouble is, that absent fat had an important job to do.

"The removal of fat reduces your body's ability to absorb many of the fat-soluble vitamins and antioxidants contained in a salad," Palumbo said. Some of those nutritionally valuable components are vitamin K and the cancer fighters beta carotene and lutein.

A study at Ohio State University found that people who ate salad with full-fat dressing absorbed 15 times more beta carotene and five times more lutein than those who went with a fat-free option, Palumbo said.

There are alternatives, she noted. Natural fat sources - avocado, olives and cheeses, for example - can be added to a salad to boost its nutrient absorption, but do so judiciously to avoid piling up the fat and calorie counts.

### **Reduced-fat peanut butter**

With one national brand, the trade-off is 25 percent less fat for 1/3 more sugar per two-tablespoon serving. That translates to exactly the same number of calories, whichever one you choose.

"The fat that they're removing is heart-healthy peanut oil that is monounsaturated," Palumbo said. "If they take out the fat, then they have to add sugar."

### **Coffee drinks**

Now that the cooler months are upon us, coffee houses are pushing specialty drinks with flavorings such as pumpkin, mocha and caramel. Be careful!

A grande pumpkin spice Frappuccino at Starbucks, taken with the whipped cream on it, will provide 400 calories, 15 grams of fat (9 of them saturated) and a whopping 53 grams of sugar.

"A tip-off is when they ask you if you'd like whipped cream on them," said Palumbo, who suggests opting for a smaller size and asking for fat-free and sugar-free substitutes. "You can never go wrong with the lattes made with skim milk."

### **It's only natural**

Just because a food is labeled natural, that doesn't mean the package contains something that's good for you. The "natural" adjective is tossed around a great deal on food products, in part because the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has granted the word very loose definition, Palumbo said.

Foods described as natural can still contain ingredients such as high-fructose corn syrup, partially hydrogenated fats and other components that nutrition experts recommend keeping to a minimum.

The key, Palumbo said, is to become a reader. Pay special attention to the verbiage on the front of a food package, and to the small print of the nutrition-facts box, and the ingredients list - which must list what goes into the product in descending order of quantity, measured by weight.