



# Food Buyer Beware: Tricks of the Food Trade

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Have you ever picked one food product over another because of health claims on the label, or what seem to be more wholesome ingredients? You may have been duped. That's because ingredient names can be misleading, serving sizes can be unrealistically small, and terms like "zero trans fat" or "all natural" are often slapped on a food item that may not be as healthy as you may think. Frustrated? You're not alone. Nearly 59% of consumers have a hard time understanding food labels, according to a Nielsen survey. Here's a list of the most common and most misleading practices some manufacturers use on food, with advice on how to look past the deception.

## **Serving Size Illusion**

Food manufacturers can be tricky with serving sizes. They can note amounts in weights such as 30 or 50 grams which is hard to relate to, because most people don't weigh their food. It is also misleading when a product appears to be low in fat, calories, or sugar, because manufacturers have listed nutrient information based on a tiny, unrealistic serving size. If you are eating more than what is listed as the serving size, ensure you consider that the nutrients listed are not applicable to the amount you are actually consuming. The good news is that the label is changing, and by 2018, manufacturers will be required to list a more reasonable serving size and make it more noticeable on the food label.

## **Sugar Trickery**

- **Sugar in ingredients:** By law, ingredients need to be listed in order of predominance, with the ones used in the greatest amounts first, but if you think a product doesn't have a high level of sugar because it is not listed at the beginning, you may be mistaken. Some manufacturers use a combination of other names for sugar, which are ultimately, just sugar- such as corn syrup, honey, molasses, fructose and sucrose. They can even further disguise sugar with sneaky, almost "healthy-sounding" names such as "brown rice syrup", "fruit juice concentrate", "evaporated cane juice" and "organic palm sugar". This splits the overall sugar content into smaller amounts, making it appear that the product contains a lot less sugar than it actually does.
- **Lightly sweetened:** The FDA has defined "sugar free", "no added sugar" and "reduced sugar" with specified amounts of sugar the product needs to contain to carry those claims. However, the term "lightly sweetened" is just made up marketing jargon used on many products that can contain a lot of sugar.

## **Made With**

Products that claim to be "made with real fruit", or "made with whole grains" (or real cheese, etc..) may not contain very much at all. While companies must list the amount of nutrients they contain, such as fat and cholesterol, they do not have to disclose the percentage of ingredients, such as fruits and whole grain.

## **Zero Trans Fat**

If a product contains less than 0.5 grams per serving, manufacturers are allowed to round it down to zero and claim "zero trans fat" on the label. So, for example, if one cookie contains 0.4 grams of trans fat, and the serving size is only one cookie, they could claim "Zero Trans Fats" on the package. Yet, you could be getting a large amount of trans fats by eating more than one cookie, which is a more typical serving size. Luckily, you can double check by looking for the words "shortening" or "partially hydrogenated oil" in the ingredients list, which indicates the presence of trans fat.

## **Organic**

Even though the term "organic" is defined and regulated by the USDA, many food marketers take advantage of the "healthy halo" attached to organic food and make overblown health claims about products that are organic, but may not be the healthiest choices. For example, a package of organic brownies or organic donuts might sound healthier, but they are still brownies and donuts filled with sugar, fat and calories.

## **All Natural**

"Natural" is not a strictly regulated term and is one of the most misleading claims on food labels. Manufacturers are allowed to claim "natural" if the food doesn't contain added colors, artificial flavors, or "synthetic substances" and is only minimally processed. That means there's a lot of room for interpretation. A food labeled "natural" may contain preservatives, genetically modified ingredients or be processed and

stripped of many nutrients. Some natural products have even been found to have high fructose corn syrup and companies have argued that since it comes from corn, it's natural.

### **Multigrain**

Multigrain indicates that the product contains multiple grains but it doesn't say how much of the grain is present. Multigrain bread, often lists refined flour as a primary ingredient. It may very well have been made with a variety of grains, but all of them have had their highly nutritious germ and bran removed during processing. If you are seeking whole grain, look for "whole" as the first word in the ingredient list (ie: "whole wheat", "whole rye", "whole oats", etc.).

### **Made with sea salt**

The reason to choose sea salt is if you are seeking a coarser texture, not because it's "healthier" or more "natural." Sea salt is no healthier than table salt as they both essentially contain the same amount of sodium. In addition, table salt supplies iodine, a nutrient that's necessary for thyroid health and sea salt does not.

### **Light**

FDA has a definition for the term "light" which means the fat content has to be 50% less than the amount found in comparable products. But companies have used the term "light" to also mean light in flavor or color which can be misleading. For example, "light" olive oil does not mean lower in fat, it means light in color. When you see the term "light" check the nutrient fact label.

### **Hiding Undesirable Ingredients**

Manufacturers can replace the names of undesirable ingredients with more innocent sounding names to create the impression that the product is healthier than it actually is. For example, the word "carmine" is used to describe a food coloring but it is actually made from "ground up red cochineal beetles" but who would buy a product containing an insect-based red food coloring?

Nitrates and nitrites are chemicals that have been shown to form possible cancer-causing nitrosamines and are used as preservatives in cured meats, such as hotdogs, bacon and ham. However, a manufacturer can choose not to list these chemicals and can even go so far as to advertise the claim "No Nitrates or Nitrites" even when meat is cured and preserved with celery juice or powder, which can naturally produce nitrates that carry the same risks.

Yeast extract is another deceptive ingredient as it contains Monosodium Glutamate (MSG), a chemical taste enhancer that is often used to enhance flavors in processed foods. Many people have adverse reactions to MSG, but will not recognize it on a label if it is disguised with the word "yeast extract".

