

10 Common Food Goofs

"Fool me once..."

BY BONNIE LIEBMAN

It's easy to make mistakes when it comes to buying food. (Even the most seasoned nutrition writers, *who should know better*, occasionally screw up.)

Maybe you didn't notice that the light peanut butter has as many calories as (and more sugar than) the regular. Or that you typically fill your bowl with not one, but *two* 250-calorie servings of cereal. Or that you would never touch Wonder bread, but can't resist a crusty (white flour) baguette.

It's not just that we're too harried or rushed to pay attention to details while shopping. Often the food industry uses (sometimes subtle) tricks to make a sale. Selling is its job, after all.

Here are 10 food goofs you need never make again.

1. It seems better than half & half.

It's right next to the coffee in virtually every office and many kitchens: a light coffee creamer like Nestlé 50% Less Fat Than Original Coffee-mate. According to the Nutrition Facts on the label, it has only 15 calories and virtually no saturated fat (0.4 grams) or sodium (5 milligrams) and no trans fat, cholesterol, or sugar.

What a deal! With numbers so low, who

could blame you for not checking the ingredients? If you did, you might wonder how a food that consists largely of glucose syrup and hydrogenated vegetable oils (coconut, palm kernel, and/or soybean) could have no sugar and so little fat.

It could be because there's a catch: the

serving size on the Nutrition Facts label is only one (level) teaspoon. It weighs so little (3 grams) that all the numbers are tiny.

Of course, it takes far more than a teaspoon of powdered creamer to whiten even a small cup of coffee. Most people simply turn over the container and pour. In fact, the directions say "Add one or more teaspoons of Coffee-mate to your favourite hot beverage."

If you add, say, two tablespoons (six teaspoons) of Coffee-mate 50% Less Fat to your 12 oz. mug of coffee, we estimate that you're up to 80 calories and 2.5 grams of saturated fat. Two tablespoons of ordinary half & half have 40 calories and 2 grams of sat fat. Oops.

2. I avoid high-fructose corn syrup.

"Now, new research at Oregon Health & Science University demonstrates that the brain—which serves as a master control for body weight—reacts differently to fructose compared with another common sweetener, glucose," said the OHSU press release in February.

"High-fructose corn syrup has become

the sweetener most commonly added to processed foods," it noted, adding that "Many dietary experts believe this increase directly correlates to the nation's growing obesity epidemic."

No wonder shoppers are confused. Even some institutions of higher education don't seem to know that high-fructose corn syrup (or HFCS, which is often called glucose-fructose in Canada) isn't pure fructose.

In fact, HFCS is, on average, roughly half fructose and half glucose. (It's "high" in fructose compared to ordinary corn syrup, which is pure glucose.) Ordinary table sugar? Half fructose and half glucose.

So if anyone wants to blame Canada's obesity epidemic on fructose, regular sugar deserves some blame, too. As do evaporated cane juice and honey (which are also half fructose), brown rice syrup, agave nectar, barley malt syrup, and juice concentrates.

A smattering of foods actually contain pure (crystalline) fructose. Healthy-sounding Fuze fruit beverage, for example, is mostly sweetened with fructose. Go figure.

What's more, some of the same people who avoid HFCS also avoid foods that raise blood sugar levels—that is, foods with a high glycemic index.

Guess what? Fructose has a low glycemic index. Glucose has the highest.

Bottom line: Fructose raises harmful triglycerides more than other sugars do (see *Nutrition Action*, Jan./Feb. 2010, cover story).

But most sweeteners are about half fructose and half glucose, so it's smart to minimize *all* sugars, not just HFCS.

High-fructose corn syrup is half fructose. Some foods (like Fuze) are mostly sweetened with pure fructose.



Two tablespoons have more calories than two tablespoons of half & half.



3. I look for the most servings of fruits or vegetables.

"In every bowl of Chef, there's a full serving of vegetables," promises the Chef Boyardee ad, which shows parents desperately trying to keep their kids from finding out.

Each serving of the salt-laden white-flour pasta has a serving of vegetables because it's got a half cup of water plus tomato purée. Big deal. Yet labels or ads touting the number of servings of fruits or vegetables must be impressing some consumers, because the claims are proliferating.

Take Bolthouse Farms beverages (which are often found in the produce aisle). "8 servings Fruits & Veggies per bottle," says the 946 mL Blue Goodness smoothie label. (Goof alert: the label's Nutrition Facts apply to just a quarter of the bottle, so don't think that you'd have to spend 170 calories to get those 8 servings. You'd have to spend 680.)

The catch: the label pictures the fruit in each bottle: 69 blueberries, 3 blackberries, 2¼ bananas, 8¼ apples, and ¾ lemon.

Impressive? Not once you realize that the beverage is mostly apple juice from concentrate, banana purée, and blueberry juice from concentrate. Roughly 8¼ apples, for example, is what you'd get in the same amount of any apple juice from concentrate.

Looking for fruits and vegetables? Buy them whole and fresh (or frozen), not as ingredients in juices, tomato sauces, crackers, or other processed foods.

4. I only buy lean meat.

Think you're buying lean meat or poultry? It's hard to know, since many packages of fresh beef or pork have no Nutrition Facts. And if you're lucky enough to find them on a package, the numbers are for a petite 125-gram serving of raw meat.

Ground beef, pork, turkey, or chicken packages do have Nutrition Facts (for a 100-gram serving of raw meat). The Facts are supposed to keep people from being misled by "Lean" claims, which are, to put it kindly, tricky. "Lean" on ground meats means no more than 17% fat. "Lean" on

steaks, roasts, or other cuts of meat or poultry means no more than 10% fat.

(Likewise, "Extra Lean" means no more than 10% fat

on ground meats but no more than 7.5% fat on steaks, roasts, etc.)

Of course, you'd never know that "lean" ground meat is fattier than "lean" steak, roasts, etc., because those meats have no Nutrition Facts. Gotcha.

5. My ice cream has just 150 calories.

Your ice cream has just 150 calories. Your hummus has just 70. And your cereal has 250. Not too bad...if that's what you actually eat.

The serving sizes on the Nutrition Facts labels—which are recommended by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency—are optimistically small for many foods. And that makes the calories, saturated fat, sodium, sugar, and other nutrients look unrealistically good.

For example:

■ **Ice cream.** The ½-cup (125 mL) serving is equal to two golf balls. That's smaller than a single scoop (about ¾ cup) at Baskin-Robbins.

■ **Meat, poultry, seafood.** A serving is 125 grams raw, which is about 100 grams after cooking. That's the size of a deck of cards.

■ **Hummus.** Only 70 calories in 2 Tbs...a golf ball's worth.

■ **Pasta sauce.** The ½-cup (125 mL) serving on most tomato-y sauce labels barely covers a typical 1½-cup serving of pasta. Ditto for cheese or cream sauces like Alfredo, which have a tiny ¼-cup (60 mL) serving.

■ **Soup.** A can of Campbell's condensed soup is supposed to make 2¼ one-cup servings. And Campbell apparently expects you to consume two-thirds of a bowl of its Healthy Request microwaveable bowls...and save a third for later.



"Lean" means up to 17% fat on ground meats but up to 10% fat on steaks, roasts, etc.



For 680 calories, you get "8 servings Fruits & Veggies" that are mostly nutrient-poor apple juice concentrate.



A sprinkling of vitamins makes sugar water seem healthy.

7. It's okay to judge a food by its reputation.

Face it. We think of some foods as healthy—or at least acceptable—even though they're no better than foods we would never touch. A few examples:

■ **Chocolate soy milk.** Would you drink a glass of ordinary chocolate milk? Never. A glass of So Nice Organic Chocolate Soy Beverage? Maybe. A cup of 1% M.F. chocolate milk has 160 calories and 6 teaspoons of sugar (roughly half



A ½-cup serving makes regular ice cream look low in calories.

of which is the naturally occurring lactose in the milk). Chocolate So Nice has 150 calories and 5 teaspoons of sugar per cup (about half of it added)—not much less.

■ **Muffins.** No way you'd ever eat doughnuts. Muffins, on the other hand.... Yet at Tim Hortons, a yeast doughnut like a Chocolate Dip or Honey Dip has 210 calories, around 2 or 3 teaspoons of added sugar, and 3½ grams of saturated fat. (Cake doughnuts are worse.) Tim's Chocolate Chip Muffin has 410 calories, 9 teaspoons of sugar, and 5 grams of sat fat.

■ **Pita chips.** Tortilla chips are junk food to most people. Pita chips seem so much healthier.



We think of the doughnut as junk food, but the muffin is worse.

Yet a 50-gram serving of Stacy's Simply Naked Pita Chips has 240 calories and 480 milligrams of sodium. The same size serving of Tostitos Restaurant Style Tortilla Chips has 260 calories and 210 mg of sodium. And 50 grams of Nacho Cheese Doritos have 260 calories and 360 mg of sodium.

Do you eat white bread? No way. How about a good French baguette? Hmmm.

8. I didn't get the memo.

"Natural." "Made with Real Fruit." You see those and similar words on labels all the time. What you may not realize is that they're part of a code that the food industry and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency have agreed on.

Sometimes, the label explains the code in tiny type. Most of the time, you're just supposed to know. Here's a decoder:

- **Made with whole grain.** Only some of the grain is whole, most likely. (Why don't labels say "Made with refined and whole grains"?)
- **Made with real fruit.** Made with a little fruit (and it's probably mostly nutritionally inferior grape, apple, or pear juice).
- **Blueberry (or other) flavour.** Contains little or no blueberry.
- **Naturally flavoured or artificially flavoured.** Whether it's natural or artificial, you get little or none of what the flavouring makes you think is in the food.

■ **Omega-3.** Contains the omega-3 fats in fish oil (EPA and DHA), the omega-3 in flax, soy oil, and canola oil (ALA), or both. The evidence is much stronger that EPA and DHA lower the risk of heart disease, but many "omega-3" foods have only ALA.

■ **High fibre.** Contains at least 4 grams of fibre per serving. The fibre can be either the intact kind in whole grains, beans, vegetables, and fruit or the isolated kind (inulin, oat hull fibre, oat fibre, soy cotyledon, pea hull fibre) that many companies now add to their foods so they can make a

"high fibre" claim. Yet there isn't much evidence that isolated fibre helps keep you regular or lowers your risk of disease, like the intact fibre in wheat bran can.

9. Calories don't count if...

Calories don't count if you eat standing up, you eat off someone else's plate, you're just straightening the edges of a pie or cake, the refrigerator door is still open, or you eat really quickly. Or so we'd like to believe.

But even reality-oriented shoppers sometimes fool themselves. A case in point: toppings for frozen yogurt.

Let's say you start with just 200 to 300 calories' worth of yogurt. (That's a "medium" or "regular" at places like Yogen Früz or TCBY.)

But then the toppings call out. Forget the chocolate chips (80 calories), the gummy bears (80), and the Oreo pieces (60). Even the "healthy" toppings like granola (100 calories), nuts (100), and "yogurt" chips (100) pile on the calories.

A medium-size topped frozen yogurt typically comes with two scoops of topping, and a large comes with three. Your waistline might be better off with a 270-calorie scoop of Häagen-Dazs Chocolate ice cream.

It's not just frozen yogurt. Some people feel so virtuous for ordering a salad that they don't notice the calories in the



"Blueberry Flavour" is code for "sugar, oil, and flour instead of blueberry."

croutons (170), tortilla or wonton strips (140), cheese (100), bacon (60), and salad dressing (100 to 300). And that's without the bread that comes with the salad...which doesn't count, of course.

10. All organic foods are good for you.

Recently, University of Michigan researchers showed 114 students a label from either ordinary Oreos or (fictitious) "Oreos made with organic flour and sugar." Then the researchers asked: "Compared to other cookie brands, do you think that 1 serving of these Oreo cookies contains fewer calories or more calories?" Sure enough, the students were more likely to think that the organic Oreos had fewer calories.¹

In a second experiment, students were asked about Susie, a hypothetical 20-year-old sorority member who was trying to lose weight. "Would it be ok for her to skip her usual three-mile"—5 km—"run after dinner to spend more time on schoolwork?" the students were asked.

The participants were more likely to say "yes" when told that Susie's dinner (roasted vegetables over brown rice) had finished with a small bowl of organic ice cream or an organic chocolate chip cookie than if the desserts were not described as organic.



Don't forget to count the toppings on salads.

How many people buy Country Choice Organic Sandwich Cookies when they'd never buy Oreos, Nature's Path Organic Frosted Toaster Pastries but not Kellogg's Pop-Tarts, or President's Choice Organics Regular Cut Potato Chips but not Lay's?

An organic food (or its ingredients) is grown without pesticides, antibiotics, or growth hormones. That's admirable. But it's not necessarily a health food.



Organic junk may not harm the environment, but it can still harm you.

¹Judgment and Decision Making 5: 144, 2010.