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# SURPRISINGLY UNHEALTHY FOODS

## WHAT TO CHOOSE INSTEAD

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### FOOD LABEL FOOLISHNESS

What to eat? Seems like a simple question, but trying to decipher food packaging may vex the savviest eater. Do you browse the grocery aisles trying to discern the "best" pasta, cereal or bread? Most healthy eaters know the obvious: there's no fruit in Froot Loops or even fruit juice in "fruit drinks". But what about "grown-up foods"? You know, those labeled as "whole grain," "all natural" or "healthy?"

**MULTI-GRAIN:** "Multi-grain" does not mean whole grain – a savvy consumer chooses "100% whole grain," ignores the front of the label, focuses on unrefined ingredients and is assured of getting all of the good nutrition contained in whole grain's kernel – including vitamin E, magnesium and fiber.

**LOW GLYCEMIC INDEX:** The GI ranks foods based on how quickly they elevate blood sugar levels compared to the same quantity of a reference food (pure glucose or white bread); but this doesn't indicate the amount of fiber in the food. A medium baked potato has a higher GI (85) than a Snickers bar (55), and who'd say a candy bar is better than a baked potato? In the context of "healthy," ignore the GI and focus on whole foods with fiber, in portions that are right for you.

**NATURAL:** Although "natural" should mean no artificial colors or ingredients, there's no guarantee the product is desirable. Read the package from back to front – the ingredient label first! A tea labeled "100% natural" sounds appealing, but most contain filtered water, high fructose corn syrup or other type of sweetener and lemon flavoring – not natural at all.

**ORGANIC:** Some foods are preferable organically raised, but in terms of calories, all types of sugar – organic, high fructose corn syrup, honey, cane sugar or white, maple syrup or agave nectar – have approximately 16 to 20 calories per teaspoon, and negligible nutrition. Said differently, they are empty calories.

**"FREE" FOODS:** Yes, we want to be free to eat what we like, but the labels "low fat" or "fat free" do not make foods calorie free. A "sugar free" or "fat free" cookie may have a similar calorie count compared to the regular, so always, read

the serving size first.

**Note:** "Fat Free" means less than .5 g of fat per serving, "low fat" or "light" means less than 3 g of fat per serving and "reduced fat" means 25% less than the reference food.

**YOGURT:** Plain, low fat or nonfat yogurt is a delicious low fat source of calcium, vitamin D, magnesium and protein. Don't be distracted by "organic" and "natural" yogurts: added sugars, granola and nuts can transform healthy to like candy. Yogurt should have but two ingredients: milk and live cultures. Keep it simple, and that goes for kids' yogurts too.

**GRANOLA:** Granola may be "natural" but it's also a typically calorie-dense food, not nutritionally desirable if it's full of oil and sugar. Stick with a high fiber, lower sugar cereal.

**"MIRACLE" JUICES:** The fronts of juice packages appeal to your quest for good health with words like "immune promoting" and "antioxidants" and picture fresh fruit. However, no studies link juice to disease prevention, and juice lacks fiber, with calories equivalent to soda. Eat whole fruit for more energy and fiber, and save your calories for fullness.

**"ENERGY" BARS:** Another name for "energy" is "calorie," and these are more akin to candy bars than nutritious snacks. For sustainable energy, grab a cup of 100-calorie yogurt; stir in a cup of crunchy low-sugar cereal; enjoy a fresh-fruit smoothie with nonfat yogurt, milk and berries; or pack a tuna sandwich on whole wheat with an orange (who says you have to have cereal for breakfast? Have lunch for breakfast and breakfast for lunch).

**MICROWAVE POPCORN:** Popcorn is a great snack, but not when loaded with hydrogenated fat (trans fat), or artificial flavors and preservatives. Make popcorn better with an air-popper and for a heartier snack, toss the hot popcorn with some grated cheddar cheese.

Read beyond the packaging and make weight-wise choices. Always shop with a list, never shop when you're hungry and read the ingredient label first – three smart strategies to help you keep the focus on healthy, good-for-you foods (that taste good, too). Making weight control second nature means shopping purposely, refusing to be swayed by advertising and taking the time to enjoy the flavor of real food. Your payoff will be better taste, improved nutrition and good health.

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Registered and licensed dietitian Susan Burke March, MS, CDE, is the author of *Making Weight Control Second Nature: Living Thin Naturally* – a book intended to liberate serial dieters and make living healthfully and weight-wisely intuitive and instinctual over the long term. Susan also serves as the Resident Nutrition Expert for [www.HealthyWage.com](http://www.HealthyWage.com), which empowers healthy living through incentives, social support, goal-setting and technology. She may be reached online at [www.SusanBurkeMarch.com](http://www.SusanBurkeMarch.com).