



MOTHER'S DAY DEALS

STARTING AT **\$19⁹⁹**

SHOP NOW >



Dow Jones Reprints: This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the [Order Reprints tool](#) at the bottom of each article on [dowjones.com](#).

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

HEALTH JOURNAL | MAY 5, 2009

The Fine Print: What's Really in a Lot of 'Healthy' Foods

By MELINDA BECK



A lot of Americans think they're eating a healthy diet these days. But it's easy to be fooled by our assumptions and the ways that food manufacturers play on them.

Take chicken. The average American eats about 90 pounds of it a year, more than twice as much as in the 1970s, part of the switch to lower-fat, lower-cholesterol meat proteins. But roughly one-third of the fresh chicken sold in the U.S. is "plumped" with water, salt and sometimes a seaweed extract called carrageenan that helps it retain the added water. The U.S. Department of Agriculture says chicken processed this way can still be labeled "all natural" or "100% natural" because those are all natural ingredients, even though they aren't naturally found in chicken.

Producers must mention the added ingredients on the package -- but the lettering can be small: just one-third the size of the largest letter in the product's name. If you're trying to watch your sodium to cut your risk of high blood pressure, heart attack and stroke, it pays to check the Nutrition Facts label. Untreated chicken has about 45 to 60 mgs of sodium per four-ounce serving. So-called enhanced or "plumped" chicken has between 200 and 400 mgs of sodium per serving, almost as much as a serving of fast-food french fries.

Adding salt water became widespread when big discount stores began selling groceries and wanted to sell chicken at uniform weights and prices. Plumping packaged chicken helps even out the weight. But that means consumers are paying for added salt water at chicken prices -- an estimated \$2 billion worth every year, according to the Truthful Labeling Coalition, a group of chicken producers that don't enhance their products.

Makers of enhanced chicken, including some of the biggest U.S. producers, say many consumers prefer it in blind taste tests and that it stays moister. Ray Atkinson, a spokesman for Pilgrim's Pride, says the company sells both enhanced and unenhanced chicken because consumers ask for it. He also notes that even at 330 mg of sodium, the enhanced chicken qualifies for the American Heart Association's mark of approval.

A survey released this week from Foster Farms, a member of the Truthful Labeling Coalition, found that 63% of consumers are unaware of the practice, and 82% believe that salt-water-injected chicken shouldn't carry the all-natural label. The telephone survey polled 1,000 consumers on the West Coast.

Here are some other foods that may not be as healthy as they appear.

Salt substitutes. If you're trying to cut down on salt, check with your doctor before you start using a salt substitute. Most contain potassium chloride, which can exacerbate kidney problems and interact badly with some heart and liver medications.

Artificial Sweeteners. Sugar-free gum, mint and candy have fewer calories and are better for your teeth. But they frequently contain sorbitol, a plant extract that isn't completely absorbed by the body and works as a natural laxative. Consuming a single pack of gum or mints can cause bloating, flatulence, stomach pains and diarrhea in people who are sensitive to it. Some diabetics find that such sugar alcohols, which are sweet but have few calories, can raise their blood sugar. Others include maltitol and xylitol.

Trans fat. There's been a remarkable reduction in these artery-cloggers in processed foods recently. But manufacturers are allowed to round down: Products labeled zero grams of trans fat can have up to 0.49 gram of fat per serving. You could still be consuming significant amounts of trans fat, "especially when the serving size is unrealistic," says Bonnie Taub-Dix, a nutritionist and spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association, a nonprofit professional organization. If the ingredients include partially hydrogenated oil, hydrogenated oil or shortening, a product isn't completely trans-fat free. And it may have considerable saturated fat as well.

The same rounding principle applies to zero calories, fat and carbohydrates. Walden Farms, which advertises a line of dips, spreads and dressings as "Fat Free, Sugar Free and Calorie Free," says its products do have trace calories and up to 0.49 gram of fat and carbohydrates per serving.

"Wheat bread." This is a meaningless term, since almost all bread is made with wheat. Some manufacturers add to the illusion by using a brown wrapper or darkening bread with brown sugar or molasses. The more healthful stuff is *whole* wheat, which includes the outer bran and the wheat germ inside, good sources of nutrients and fiber. Check the ingredients. If the first one listed is "enriched wheat flour," you aren't getting much whole grain.

A few bread makers are still displaying the USDA's old Food Pyramid on their packages -- the one that recommended six to 11 servings of bread or pasta a day. That's been replaced by a more individualized pyramid that recommends only six carbohydrate servings, three of which should be whole grains.

Fiber. Companies are adding fiber to all kinds of products -- including yogurt, ice cream and beverages. In many cases, the added fiber comes from purified powders, not the kind of fiber found in whole grains, beans, vegetables and fruits. The latter have been shown to lower cholesterol, reduce the risk of diabetes and heart disease and may cut the risk of colon cancer. But there isn't much evidence that "isolated" fibers like inulin, maltodextrin, oat fiber and polydextrose have the same effect, according to the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a nonprofit consumer-advocacy group. The Nutrition Facts label doesn't differentiate between the kind of fiber counted, so check the ingredients.

"The added fiber is probably better than nothing, but it's not as good as fiber from natural sources like fruits, vegetables and whole grains," says CSPI Executive Director Michael Jacobson.

Yogurt. The yogurt aisle is dizzy these days with products that promise to reduce your cholesterol, control your blood pressure, protect your digestive health or boost your immune system. In many cases, it's a single ingredient that provides the benefit, and you can find much more of it in other sources. For example, Promise activ SuperShots say they "Help Control Blood Pressure" thanks to 350 mgs of potassium. There's much more potassium in a banana, a cup of spinach or a baked potato. DanActive probiotic dairy drink's immunity-boosting claims stem from its *L. casei Immunitas* active culture. There's lots of research interest in such probiotics, but for now, the marketing is ahead of the science. The friendly bacteria in DanActive has mainly been shown to fight diarrhea in people taking antibiotics.

Super water. The Center for Science in the Public Interest sued Coca-Cola Co. earlier this year over claims on its VitaminWater beverages. The center argued that the drinks -- with names like "defense," "rescue," "energy" and "endurance" -- are mainly sugar water with 125 calories per bottle. Coke called the lawsuit "frivolous" and said its VitaminWater brands are properly labeled. "Consumers today are savvy, they are educated and they are looking for more from their beverages than simply hydration," said Coke spokesman Scott Williamson.

Government surveys show that most Americans aren't deficient in many of the vitamins supplied in these drinks. If you consume more than you need, the excess gets excreted.

Omega 3. Many foods are adding these essential fatty acids, said to cut the risk of heart disease, cancer and arthritis and help promote brain health. But you can get a lot more from natural foods. You'd need to drink 45 eight-ounce glasses of milk that is fortified with 32 mgs of omega 3 to get as much of these fatty acids as you get in a three-ounce serving of salmon.

Will any of the products mentioned here hurt you? No, but they may not help you as much as manufacturers would like you to think. "Try to buy foods as close to their natural state as possible," says Ms. Taub-Dix.

■ [Email HealthJournal@wsj.com](mailto:EmailHealthJournal@wsj.com)

Printed in The Wall Street Journal, page D1

Copyright 2009 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com