

The Allure of **'FITNESS' FOODS:** *The Experts Weigh In*

BY D.B. ESTRIN

If the ad says "Fitness Food," it may be unfit to eat! Don't be fooled by the hype. Health and fitness don't come in bars. There are no shortcuts to healthy eating. Start by knowing what to look for on the label.



You have set out on your weekly shopping trip to the supermarket. You made sure to follow that-well known piece of advice: Don't shop when you're hungry. In fact, you have had a nutritious breakfast to fortify yourself against poor buying choices. You stroll down the cereal aisle, mentally patting yourself on the back for effortlessly bypassing the many sugar-laden cereals that seem more like candy than food. Some of the cereal boxes even vaunt their unhealthful contents: Sugar Smacks, Cocoa Puffs, and the like. You move quickly; this section has nothing for you.

You arrive at the end of the aisle where the health section offers breakfast cereals and the word "fitness" catches your eye. Instead of whimsical cartoon figures meant to allure young uneducated consumers — so that they will pester the older uneducated consumers insistently enough to buy them — the ads accompanying the "fitness" cereal boxes project health. The pictures show variations of toned and vibrant folk exuding effervescence (enough for both them *and you*), engaged in some athletic activity. It all adds up to one message: Good choice. Or is it?

THE POWER OF ADVERTISEMENTS

It was recently discovered that, counterintuitively, when foods are marked as "fitness" foods, people eat more of it and exercise less.

"Branding the product as 'fit' increased consumption for those trying to watch their weight," write authors Joerg Koenigstorfer (Technische Universite, Munchen) and Hans Baumgartner (Pennsylvania State University). "To make matters worse, these eaters also reduced their physical activity, apparently seeing the 'fit' food as a substitute for exercise." (Science Daily, 23 June 2015)

In a study to determine the effects of fitness-branded food on those who are careful about their body weight, participants were provided two snack options. One was labeled "trail-mix" and the other, "fitness snack." The "fitness snack" package showed a picture of running shoes. Participants were to choose one snack or the other, as if they were helping themselves to an afternoon snack at home. After tasting and rating the chosen snack, they were given the option to exercise on a stationary bicycle. "Snackers ate more of the product if it was marked as a 'fitness' food and they chose to ride the bike less." The study was published in the *Journal of Marketing Research*. Before we decide that compelling labeling translates into superior food choices and load our carts with products claiming to be "fitness" foods, we might ask why such labeling can actually have the opposite effect on our health efforts.

I posed the question to Chavi Kramer, RD, MPH, a clinical dietitian at Afitness.

"When people see the food being labeled as 'fitness' or even 'diet' and 'low-fat,' they immediately give themselves permission to eat more of it because in their mind the food is healthy. When people have a craving for an 'unhealthy'

food like a chocolate bar, or a piece of cake, they fight the craving by choosing a 'healthy substitute,' often rewarding themselves by eating as much as they want of the healthy food. A pitfall of this reward eating is getting off track of listening to their body for its true needs at the moment. Another issue is that people notice the word 'fitness' and associate the food with making them potentially more 'fit', precluding the need to exercise to be fit."

Miriam Botwinick, MS, RD, another Afitness nutritionist, points out that the study of labeling was especially significant for restrained eaters. "In general, restrained eaters are people who are very concerned about their weight and are more susceptible to over-eating compared with regular eaters. They are much more sensitive to environmental cues such as going inside a bakery to buy a muffin or croissant after catching a whiff of the tantalizing aroma, and they tend to eat more when more food is readily available and go for deserts. This is in contrast to healthier eaters, who are more tuned in to their body's cues and tend to eat when they are hungry, stop when satiated, and not spend much time obsessing about food between meals. 'Restrained eaters' may tend to allow themselves bigger portions since the snack marked 'fitness' gives a false sense of security.

"An additional point is that there may not be a big difference between some 'fitness' or 'energy' bars and a candy bar, as the former often has the same amount of sugar and fats as the latter — even while there may be something healthy in there too. People may be better off eating a small handful of nuts and a fruit rather than the energy bar," Miriam adds.

This response was echoed by Chava Dumas, a Jerusalem-based educator and women's health advocate for nearly three decades. "The problem with marketing a food as a 'fitness food' is that people somehow lead themselves to believe that eating the fitness food has a magical effect on our health. If we think that the magical fitness food will make us thin and healthy, we may not do the work — exercising to burn calories and strengthen our heart and eating the greens and whole grains that have been documented to really improve our weight and health. It's too simplistic but easy for people to think 'it's a fitness food; it's good for me — so I can eat more!'"

FIGHTING THE TREND

"If it came from a plant, eat it. If it was made in a plant, don't." Food Rules: An Eater's Manual, by Michael Pollan

If, as these studies show, such product marketing can adversely affect our health choices, how can we fight the trend?

As with all advertisements, awareness is key. When it comes to exercise, we need to face the hard science that a stationary object tends to remain stationary and not allow ourselves to be duped by an ad which subtly provides an escape route or substitute for plain old exertion. "In an ideal world," Chavi Kramer adds,

6 Tips for Staying in TIP TOP SHAPE

Listen to your body about when, how much, and even what to eat.

Attend to the "how" of eating as well: "He who eats slowly lives long." (Talmud Brachos 54b)

Read the ingredients to determine whether what you are eating is truly healthy, avoiding the more processed products.

The Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchos De'os 4:150, tells us that even when the correct foods are eaten and one follows all the rules of medicine, for the person who does not exercise, the effect is often depleted energy levels and even pain.

Drink-Move-Eat: Exercise, especially before eating, is beneficial — a heated up system digests all food better.²

Realize that there's a time and place for all treats in our lives. Enjoying what you eat is also part of staying healthy, and sometimes that means eating unhealthy foods.

"foods should not have such labels such as 'fat-free' or 'fitness' because they are manipulating the consumers. Realistically, a way to deal with this is to teach people how to read and understand labels, so that instead of looking at what the food is called, or how it is packaged — with pictures of happy-looking people — they can simply look at the label and decide for themselves. The other important thing to teach people is that we should still be eating in moderation, even if the food is healthy, and that *mindfully eaten* unhealthy foods can be a part of a healthy diet. Finally, exercise should always be encouraged and not necessarily with the emphasis being weight loss but rather overall mental and physical health."

So fighting the trend might include more of an inner focus — listening to your body's cues for hunger and satiety — and fewer outside cues, such as ads.

If we back up, reassess, and ask ourselves the right questions before we even get to the stores, we have a far better chance of reaching for truly healthful foods.

Rena Reiser, a health coach who trained with both Dr. William Sears — an American pediatrician who has written over 40 books on nutrition, parenting and healthy aging — and Intuitive Eating pioneer Evelyn Tribole, calls her program the *Ima Rejuvenator*. Rena emphasizes that a core element that is often overlooked is how we look at food, diet and exercise in general. "We are so ingrained in our body image and with the constant drive to look good, a mental switch goes on which tells the person: 'fitness food' — I'm going to lose weight

Guidelines for Reading Food Labels



The fewer the ingredients, generally, the healthier the food item is. Most straightforward foods can be made with three to 10 ingredients. For example, a bag of standard chips is: potato, oil, salt. A popular American brand of potato “chips” has nine ingredients. If you see a list of ingredients that seems overly long to you, it is a good indication that the company added all sorts of extras. That may be good for shelf life and/or to mimic good flavor but not good for your body. (R.R.)

Look for hidden sugars. They crop up in places you would least expect them, like breads and crackers (often lurking in any word ending with “ose”). (R.R.) When assessing sugar grams, aside from making sure that sugar is not one of the first three ingredients, it is important to be aware that the label refers to all sugars — whether from a natural source (such as lactose in milk and yogurt and fructose in fruit) or from added sugar, such as high fructose corn syrup. Some commonly used synonyms for sugar include agave, barley malt extract, cane juice or syrup, dextrose, glucose, honey, rice syrup, maltose, and fruit juice concentrates. Today, many food companies use several different types of sweeteners in their products, so unless you are a savvy consumer and read the label closely, you may be unaware of how many different sweeteners are used in the product you just chose. (M.B.)

It's important to recognize the ingredients. Look for more natural ingredients and fewer preservatives and chemicals added. (C.K.)

Avoid trans fats. We want to avoid trans-fats in any amount since they are an engineered fat that our bodies can't break down and use. A product can claim to have 0% trans fats if it contains less than 0.5g of trans fats per serving, so always look at the ingredients list to see if hydrogenated fats (and partially hydrogenated fats) are listed. (R.R.)

There are tens of different names for MSG, including “natural flavors.” Find a resource that lists all the names of MSG. MSG is a chem-

ical additive that many people have acute sensitivities to and don't even realize it. MSG warning symptoms often include headaches, palpitations, skin flushing, and tightness of chest, to name just a few. In addition, it has been linked to ADD, ADHD, mental numbness, chronic fatigue, asthma and more. (R.R.)

Pay attention to the serving size listed on the food label. If you are going to eat double the serving listed on the package, it's important to remember to do the math — because then you are also eating twice the calories, twice the sugar, and twice the fat. (M.B.)

Beware of low-fat, sugar-free products. When you are craving something sweet and are thinking of buying a low-fat, sugar-free product, don't be fooled into thinking that this is always the better choice. Many of these items have about the same amount of calories as the “regular” product. Research has found that overweight people who choose the lower-fat, sugar-free product often eat more of the product. (M.B.)

Looking to increase your fiber intake? It may be found more readily in produce than behind a food label. We should aim to have 20 to 30 grams of fiber daily, 7-10 per meal and 3-4 per snack. This is easily achieved by consuming whole grains, fruits, vegetables, kidney beans, chickpeas, and nuts regularly. (M.B.)

Compare food labels of similar items for calorie, sugar, protein and fiber content. For a burst of energy in the middle of the day, rather than grabbing an energy bar, you might be better off choosing a low-fat yogurt sprinkled with some high-fiber cereal or eat a fruit together with a handful of raw nuts. (M.B.)

Amounts to look for. If the food contains dietary fiber (e.g. grains, cereals, bread), it should be more than 7g/100g.

Low-fat products should have less than 3g/100g of fat (unless the food is a fat such as oil or avocado). (C.K.)

Sodium should be less than 300mg/100g.

with this. For men, ‘fit’ may translate as lean and muscular just as the picture on the product shows. The same goes with the mindset of why we exercise. If our focus is to look good rather than for our overall well-being, then we become susceptible to messages which assert this promise. If we are out to nourish and care for ourselves in a broader sense then we won't be interested in short cuts and all the enticing ads that pop up.

“For example, it is more helpful to say to oneself, ‘I'll pick up this energy or fitness bar because I do like the taste of it, and because I'm on the go and don't have the time to eat properly now.’ We run into trouble when we tell ourselves that this is a good meal replacement. A ‘diet mentality’ tells us, ‘Anything that helps me lose weight is acceptable,’ and we look at this energy bar as a diet tool that replaces other methods.”

In her approach toward true fitness, Rena also helps her clients with self-acceptance. All this factors into becoming a discerning buyer and can fortify us against quick-fix labels.

As is true with the psychology of advertisements in general, so it goes with fitness food labeling: It depends on the attitude we have to begin with that makes us susceptible or not to those promising ads.

Rena warns that eye-catching ads are even a challenge for the more informed and health-minded. We're always on the lookout for better made shelf products. “I went over to a product that said ‘Nutrition Packed — multi-grain cracker.’ I picked it up and, instead of relying on the image, I checked out the fiber content, which flours and oils were used, and concluded that they were poor ingredients and decided that I could make something better myself at home. For a once-in-awhile snack maybe I wouldn't scrutinize it as much, but I would be more discerning if it will become another food item in the house.”

Authors Koenigstorfer and Baumgartner conclude, “It is important that more emphasis be placed on monitoring fitness cues in marketing. For example, a brand could offer gym vouchers or exercise tips instead of just implying fitness via a label or image. Reminding the consumer that exercise is still necessary may help counteract the negative effect of these fitness-branded foods.”

As it turns out, the same principles in life apply to principles of food shopping — go with content rather than image. And if purchasing and eating a ‘fitness’ product as a shortcut to health and weight control seems too good to be true — it's probably because it is. ■

¹ *Everyday Wholeness: Self-Coaching for the Jewish Family* p. 169

² *ibid* p. 129

D.B. Estrin is the author of Everyday Wholeness: Self Coaching for the Jewish Family (Menucha Publishers 2015).