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✦ Susan Says: Read Those Labels!

A friend of mine, I'll call her Andie, was very excited to tell me that a small Starbucks skinny vanilla latte has only 90 calories. I looked skeptical. She knew what I was going to say and before I could open my mouth, she said, "I know, I know. Did I read the label? Do I know what I'm actually drinking?"

Food is what keeps us alive and fuels us for the activities we enjoy. Yet we push this huge responsibility onto restaurants, food companies, and huge farming conglomerates to determine what we put into our own bodies. We want food fast (and too often - fast food) and we want it in convenient, prepackaged, portable, tasty, healthy servings. Unfortunately most food sources are high in processing and low in nutrition. So how can you take back control of what you eat?

Label reading is the biggest action you can take to know exactly what you are eating. *Here are some tips to get you in the habit:*

1. **Read Everything.** Read the labels of ALL the foods you buy. This will make grocery shopping a slightly longer endeavor at first but you will soon learn what is actually in the foods you buy and eat. You can even ask for nutrition information at restaurants - they are currently required by law to provide it upon request.*
2. **Don't Assume.** By reading labels you will discover all the "extra" ingredients you have been eating. I used

to buy a certain brand of table salt and I was shocked to discover that it contained sugar. Food manufacturers also change ingredients based on food availability and cost so re-read your favorite labels from time to time.

3. Do You Recognize That Ingredient? Do you feel comfortable eating xanthan gum? What about carrageenan?

The first is corn sugar gum and it's used to thicken water-based foods such as dairy products and salad dressings. There is no current FDA issue with xanthan gum. The second is derived from Irish moss and is used as an emulsifier in many foods such as chocolate products, cheese foods, and jellies. Carrageenan is also on the FDA list for further study based on possible links to cancer in rats. How do you know what is OK to eat and what is not? Educate yourself.

4. Educate Yourself. Can't tell if an ingredient is friend or foe? Research it on the internet or buy a reference book** and keep it handy. In the mean time, a good general guide is not to eat anything you don't recognize, can't spell, or isn't a known whole food.

5. Keep the List Short. Is the list of ingredients short or does it resemble War and Peace? A short list usually means less filler and is probably closer to a whole food source. Most of the time I don't even have to read the label. If I see too much tiny black font on the package, I automatically put it back on the shelf.

6. Are the ingredients appropriate for the product? Bread is a great example. If you read bread labels you will quickly discover that not all breads are created equal. Basic bread ingredients should only include some type of flour, water and yeast. Anything else is extra. Sometimes the extras are beneficial (grains, nuts, fruits) and sometimes not so beneficial (DATEM - Diacetyl Tartaric (Acid) Ester of Monoglyceride -- an emulsifier primarily used in baking to strengthen the dough).

7. Fresh is Best. When possible, avoid the packaged products and go for fresh, whole foods. Whole foods taste better, tend to be higher in overall nutritional value, and it will save you time reading labels!

As for Andie and her Starbucks skinny vanilla latte, I checked Starbucks' website for nutritional value and ingredients list. It is indeed 90 calories but the ingredients list*** is vague and I am a little scared of what might make up, "delicious sugar-free flavored syrups", so I remain skeptical. But at least she is reading labels!

Additional References:

*A two-part national standard for nutrition disclosure law recently passed requiring restaurants to disclose nutritional information via menu labeling (2009).

** "A Consumer's Dictionary of Food Additives" by Ruth Winter, M.S.

***Starbucks skinny vanilla latte: "Made with Starbucks signature espresso roast, freshly steamed milk, and one of our delicious sugar-free flavored syrups (vanilla, hazelnut, caramel, or cinnamon dolce) and topped with creamy foam."

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