

June 2020 Health Notes by Evelyn Ames

Foods/Snacks Promoted as Healthy! Are They Really?

Nutritious-sounding names often seen on food packaging and promoted on supermarket shelves, convey to the shopper that the food is fresh, nutritious and wholeness! Nutritionists often call this the “health halo.” Various foods, especially snacks, are marketed as being chock full of nutrients and healthy for the consumer, providing most of one’s daily nutritional needs. Many times, the products fall short of being nutritional and more than likely contain more sugars, sodium, and calories than one may realize. Following are examples *Consumer Reports* evaluated in 2019.

Rice Cakes: You prefer not to eat wheat products? Why not switch to rice cakes? More than likely, they are probably made with whole-grain brown rice which provides little fiber. The importance of fibrous foods is that they help curb appetite. Be aware that rice products may contain arsenic due to the way rice is grown. This is the reason why it is suggested not to feed babies and little children rice cakes. Flavored varieties of rice cakes often contain more calories and sugars than expected. Example: “two Lundberg Family Farms Salted Caramel rice cakes have 6 grams of added sugars and 160 calories.” A better choice for snack: air-popped popcorn.

Veggie Sticks: What sounds more nutritional than to eat more “veggies”? What is really in most of the “veggie sticks”? They are made with potato flour and starch, oil, salt, and some vegetable powder for color. An ounce of Sensible Portions Garden Veggie Straws has 130 calories, 7 grams of fat, less than a gram of fiber, and 210 mg of sodium. Veggie sticks are snacks, not veggies! Air-popped popcorn is again an option.

Spinach Wraps: Spinach wraps will not help increase the intake of spinach. Nutritional assessment shows the amount of spinach is negligible. Check labels to see which brands use food coloring along with a small amount of spinach powder to hyper the amount and color of “spinach”. Also check to see what flour is used. Why not make your own wrap. Fill it with the veggies you want and like?

Protein Powder: The promotion of protein powder is apparently based on the assumption that most people, especially older adults, are not eating enough protein. Media advertising promotes the idea that there is a serious deficiency in the United States. For sure, there are population groups that have deficiency (e.g., school age children whose families struggle to feed them and older adults who have difficulty feeding themselves. Children are especially vulnerable now that they are not receiving school lunches and weekend food boxes due to school closures because of COVID-19 pandemic). Older adults do need a bit more protein than younger adults but protein powder is not recommended as the way to accomplish this. Chemical analysis has found some powders to contain heavy metals and other toxins. Check food contaminant analysis at web sites of the Food and Drug Administration and professional nutrition organizations. Suggestions for increasing protein intake include Greek yogurt, peanut butter, and tofu.

Ground Turkey: Is a turkey burger always better than a beef burger. Ground turkey can contain dark meat and skin, which add calories and fat. As a comparison, Butterball 85 percent lean ground turkey has 230 calories and 17 grams of fat (5 grams saturated) in 4 ounces. That amount of 85 percent lean ground beef has 243 calories and 17 grams of fat (6.5 grams saturated). Not too much difference. It is a matter of taste. For a better choice, consider ground turkey breast meat. Four ounces has 2 grams of fat of which 0.5 is saturated.

Granola: Labels for granola products list a mixture of oats, fruit, and nuts. Check labels to see what else is included, such as whey protein and the amount of sugars and fat. A half-cup serving of Quaker Simply Granola Oats, Honey & Almonds has 200 calories and 10 grams of sugars. Consumer Reports suggests a better choice is “a base of high-fiber, low-sugar cereal—such as Shredded Wheat (79 calories and 0 grams of sugars per half-cup) or Cascadian Farm Hearty Morning Fiber (110 calories and 5 grams of sugars in a half-cup); garnish with granola.” Why not sprinkle granola on to plain Greek yogurt?

Instant Oatmeal in packets: “Rolled oats and other less processed types aren’t digested as quickly as instant oats, meaning they won’t cause the same rise in blood sugar.” Packets and cups of instant oats tend to have far more sugars compared to preparing one’s own oatmeal. “A single-serve cup of Bob’s Red Mill Gluten Free Brown Sugar and Maple instant oatmeal has 9 grams (more than 2 teaspoons) of added sugars.” Better choices are cooking your own rolled or steel-cut oats and served with fruit (blueberries and cranberries are great along with dash of cinnamon).