

News Column for use Week of July 27, 2020

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Watch for New Food Labels

Kansas State University nutrition specialist Sandy Procter says recent changes to nutrition labels on most foods should be viewed as a great ally for consumers and their good health.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration initially published rules on changing nutrition information on food labels in 2016, citing the need for those labels to reflect updated scientific information, including the link between diet and such chronic diseases as obesity and heart disease.

Since that time, American food companies have gradually come into compliance. Manufacturers with \$10 million or more in annual sales were required to switch to the new label by January 1 of this year; those with less than \$10 million in annual sales must meet the labeling requirements by January 1, 2021.

“The consumer is the winner here,” Procter said. “It allows each of us to control what we are putting into our bodies.”

The new label not only reflects more of what we know about foods, but also is based on current nutrition and public health research, and the updated dietary guidelines for Americans. Public input was also considered, Procter said.

In addition to larger print, the new label is more clear on the number of calories per serving of any given food, and lists information on nutrients considered more vital for overall health.

For example, Procter said, “vitamin D and potassium were never on the label until now. Before, the nutrients highlighted were vitamin A and vitamin C, which are nutrients of concern in other countries, but not in the United States.

Procter said the new labels reflect the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, identifying vitamin D and the mineral potassium as nutrients where most U.S. consumers fall short.

“Vitamin D is activated in the liver and is made by our bodies when we spend a little time out in the sun each day,” Procter said. “But vitamin D is limited in food sources.”

“Vitamin D is important to boost our auto-immune systems. And it works with calcium to support bone health and bone strength. So, it makes sense for us to look at a food label and determine that a food is a great source of vitamin D.”

Potassium, she adds, forms a pump with sodium to keep fluids in balance in and around cells. Eating foods high in potassium helps to offset high levels of sodium, which can contribute to high blood pressure and other disease.

“So, while we are carefully watching our salt intake, we might want to be more interested in sources that are high in potassium,” Procter said. “Fruits, vegetables, milk and other dairy products are good sources of potassium.”

The new food labels not only include the quantity of sodium, potassium and other nutrients in a single serving, but also the percentage one serving contributes to the daily dietary guidelines of a given nutrient – called the Percent Daily Value.

“That information was there before, but you had to invest time and some thought process to find it,” Procter said. “Most of us really don’t want to do that when it comes to limiting or determining our food intake.”

More information about all of the changes on the nutrition facts label is available online from the FDA.

“The new label is user-friendly and contains as much information as most of us would really need when choosing foods,” Procter said. “If you are watching your weight or concerned about pre-diabetes, then it’s much easier to look at calories and added sugars. Or maybe you’ve been told to watch your fat and sodium intake because you have high blood pressure; in that case, you may read the label to quickly know how many calories, grams of fat or sodium is in a food.”

“We can pick and choose the parts of the label that mean the most to each of us. It’s great if you want to read the whole label, but certain parts may be more important and allow us to focus on our personal nutrition needs.”

For more information about making wise food choices, contact Kathy McEwan at kmcewan@ksu.edu or by phone at 620-365-2242.