

War on diabetes: An inside look

How buyers can be duped by food labels

Marketing buzzwords may lead consumers to over-infer nutritional value of an item



Linette Lai

Pick up a supermarket granola bar, and chances are its packaging will feature wholesome grains, fresh fruit, or a label emphasising that it is made with "real" ingredients.

But its nutrition label probably tells a different story. In fact, the United States Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee classifies granola as a "grain-based dessert" in the same category as cakes, donuts and cookies.

The experts say that it is easy for consumers to fall into the trap of believing that a processed food item is better for you than it actually is, especially when it is marketed as a healthier option.

"Research has shown that how food items are framed and packaged can strongly influence consumers' perception of and preference for these items," said Associate Professor Leonard Lee, from the National University of Singapore's (NUS) business school.

Added Assistant Professor Mary Chong, from the NUS Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health: "These processed convenience food products often use healthy foods as their core ingredients – such as oats in granola bars. Thus, the persistent association of these products with their health qualities."

Labels, in particular, can make a big difference.

Certain fruit juices may be marketed as "high in antioxidants", but it is unlikely that this claim would have been tested in an accredited facility, said Ms Siti Hussain, a lecturer in the applied nutrition research domain at Temasek Polytechnic's school of applied science.

"They use that because the literature says fruit contains antioxidants," she said.

She added that food companies tend to use the latest tags – such as "organic" or "gluten-free" – which may lead consumers to over-infer the nutritional value of a food item.

These problems extend to products marketed as "suitable for diabetics" as well.

Such labels can lead to the misconception that those with diabetes should buy such foods, said Ms Ong Li Juen, a principal dietitian with Changi General Hospital's dietetic and food services.

"For example, when biscuits and chocolates are labelled as 'diabetic' or 'sugar-free', it does not mean that they are healthier," Ms Ong said.

"These foods may still contain carbohydrates, which affect blood sugar level, and also have high fat content."

In other words, people with diabetes should always read nutrition labels carefully, rather than relying



Experts say consumers should carefully read nutrition information instead of relying on tags like "diabetic", "sugar free" or "organic".
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on marketing buzzwords.

Another common misconception among customers is that low-fat milk is healthier than full-cream milk, said Ms Gene Tan, who runs The Diabetic Shop.

"So many times I have told the consumer that this is not true," said Ms Tan, who set up the shop in 2011 to bring in speciality foods suitable for diabetics.

"Most manufacturers who make low-fat products choose to add sugar to make their products taste as good as the normal version – so please take the normal one."

For example, she said, regular Farmhouse fresh milk comes with 4.4g of carbohydrates per 100ml but the low-fat version has 5.7g.

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POWER OF PACKAGING

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ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR LEONARD LEE, from the National University of Singapore's business school.

CHECK THE INGREDIENTS

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