Carrots now fat-free!

Who'd have thought it? Dr William Sukala takes a look at 'fibbing' food labels

The absurdity of the sheer idea that carrots might just have been discovered to be fat-free beautifully illustrates my view of the proverbial carnival shell game played by food companies. It also says a lot of the carnival goers – we consumers – who so willingly continue to throw good money after bad hoping that one of those shells contains the magic health bullet.

The other day, I saw an advertisement for 'low-carb' beer. It got me thinking about the lengths to which food and beverage companies will go in cooking up clever marketing campaigns.

Consumer health be damned!

Though I've been known to imbibe a beer or five from time to time, the idea that it's 'low-carb' is completely off-base. It totally fails to take into account the fact that my beer is still chock full of calories. Even if food chemists slice off a gram or two of carb from its high-carb cousin, alcohol still provides approximately 7 calories (29 kJ) per gram. A safe energy estimate for low-carb beer is somewhere around 100 calories and that isn't so different from a regular high-carb beer. Drink a six-pack a day, and you're still on a collision course for a low-carb keg around your gut.

This entire marketing campaign is based upon the misguided notion that "carbs make me fat". Yes, a junk-food diet high in refined carbohydrates – soft drinks, chips, sweets – passes through your stomach quickly and therefore leaves you feeling hungrier sooner and more likely to consume excess calories. End result: you get fat. That's no surprise – it's just the basic laws of thermodynamics at work.

Unfortunately, though, with the help of the food industry, the general public has been led to think that all carbohydrates are evil metabolic villains, poisoning our bodies. Unfortunately, this pays absolutely no consideration to the type of carbohydrate or how it fits into an overall balanced diet.

It's just like when, years ago, government health agencies shouted from the bell tower that if we just ate less fat, we'd all lose weight. The only problem was that what they intended and what we actually heard were two different messages.

People took the message to the extreme: "If I don't eat any fat, then I can't get fat". Food products were overhauled and the fat content drastically reduced, but it was replaced with sweeteners such as refined sugar. People carried on wolfing down low-fat products, but waistlines around the world continued to expand.

That's when the food industry seized the moment and jumped on the anti-carb bandwagon. And the low-carb hysteria is still running strong, even as global obesity rates continue to rise.

We ourselves are complicit in all this though. Food industry executives, quack diet book authors, and self-proclaimed fitness gurus hawking infomercial exercise gimmicks have all capitalised on public distrust of the so-called establishment and our desire for quick-fix health solutions. Even though none of the above has made one iota of difference to the woeful state of public health.

You don't have to be a nutritional biochemist to eat healthily. Forget the low-carb beer, soft drinks, sweets, chips, and all other kinds of refined rubbish food. Make small changes you can live with and stick with them for the long haul. Exercise? While going to the gym is a step in the right direction, there's evidence that prolonged sitting in your day job can undo all your hard work and still leave you at risk of health problems. Ever heard of a standing workstation? Spend more time on your feet 'wasting energy' through the day and you can expect a more svelte you.

And next time you see a food label trumpeting "chocolate éclairs now low in fat", always read the fine print. Serving size: 10mg!

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