

Reading food labels

MSG

What is MSG?

MSG, or monosodium glutamate, is a processed food additive. It is an extremely dangerous neurotoxin (excitotoxin) that shrivels and kills brain cells in the hypothalamus and has been linked to migraines, seizures, ADD/ADHD, heart palpitations, tremors, and MANY other symptoms that can even be fatal. I know it was partly responsible for my constant daily headaches (for about 20 years) and the two years of migraines every day that led to a hospitalization, more drugs that did nothing but cause side effects and years of misery.

What is the hypothalamus?

The hypothalamus is a portion of the brain, located just above the brain stem, roughly the size of an almond. Though small, it's incredibly important as it is responsible for certain metabolic processes and other activities of the autonomic nervous system. One of the most important functions of the hypothalamus is to link the nervous system to the endocrine system via the pituitary gland. The hypothalamus controls body temperature, hunger, thirst, fatigue, sleep, and circadian cycles.

What is an excitotoxin?

An excitotoxin is a chemical that causes a brain cell to become overexcited and fire uncontrollably, leading to cell death. MSG (and other excitotoxins like [aspartame](#)) has the potential for inflicting permanent damage to the brain and nervous system. These chemicals also cross the placental barrier, harming the brains of unborn children.

Ok, so I should just avoid MSG and aspartame, right?

Absolutely. However, you need to know that there are over 40 hidden names for MSG on food labels. FORTY?!? Yes. 40! 4-0.

So, foods labeled NO-MSG or MSG-Free (think Chinese restaurants) may not have actual MSG added to it, but if they contain any of these ingredients, there is STILL MSG IN THE FOOD!

Here is more information from truthinlabeling.org

Names of ingredients that ALWAYS contain processed free glutamic acid:

Glutamic acid (E 620)
Glutamate (E 620)
Monosodium glutamate (E 621)
Monopotassium glutamate (E 622)
Calcium glutamate (E 623)
Monoammonium glutamate (E 624)
Magnesium glutamate (E 625)
Natrium glutamate
Yeast extract
Anything “hydrolyzed”
Any “hydrolyzed protein”
Calcium caseinate, Sodium caseinate
Yeast food, Yeast nutrient
Autolyzed yeast
Gelatin
Textured protein
Soy protein, soy protein concentrate
Soy protein isolate
Whey protein, whey protein concentrate
Whey protein isolate
Anything “...protein”
Vetsin
Ajinomoto

*Glutamic acid found in unadulterated protein does not cause adverse reactions. To cause adverse reactions, the glutamic acid must have been processed/manufactured or come from protein that has been fermented.

Names of ingredients that often contain or produce processed free glutamic acid:

Carrageenan (E 407)
Bouillon and broth
Stock
Any “flavors” or “flavoring”
Maltodextrin
Citric acid, Citrate (E 330)
Anything “ultra-pasteurized”

Barley malt
Pectin (E 440)
Protease
Anything “enzyme modified”
Anything containing “enzymes”
Malt extract
Soy sauce (a reader has informed us that Russell Blaylock, MD states in his book, Excitotoxins: The Taste That Kills, that soy sauce ALWAYS contains MSG)
Soy sauce extract
Anything “protein fortified”
Anything “fermented”
Seasonings

The following are ingredients suspected of containing or creating sufficient processed free glutamic acid to serve as MSG-reaction triggers in HIGHLY SENSITIVE people:

Corn starch
Corn syrup
Modified food starch
Lipolyzed butter fat
Dextrose
Rice syrup
Brown rice syrup
Milk powder
Reduced fat milk (skim; 1%; 2%)
Most things low fat or no fat
Anything “Enriched”
Anything Vitamin enriched

* E numbers are use in Europe in place of food additive names.

The following work synergistically with MSG to enhance flavor. If they are present for flavoring, so is MSG.

Disodium 5'-guanylate (E 627)
Disodium 5'-inosinate (E-631)
Disodium 5'-ribonucleotides (E 635)

Low fat and no fat milk products often contain milk solids that contain MSG and many dairy products contain carrageenan, guar gum, and/or locust bean gum. Low fat and no fat versions of ice cream and cheese

may not be as obvious as yogurt, milk, cream, cream cheese, cottage cheese, etc., but they are not exceptions.

Protein powders contain glutamic acid, which, invariably, will be processed free glutamic acid (MSG). Individual amino acids are not always listed on labels of protein powders.

THE DANGERS OF FOOD ADDITIVES

FOOD ADDITIVES

What is sodium nitrite? Sodium nitrite is a food additive used as a preservative. It is used to extend the life of meats, and to prevent the growth of bacteria.

What's the problem? Sodium nitrite is toxic. When you eat it, nitrosamines are formed. These dangerous compounds are highly carcinogenic. During lab studies, researchers inject these compounds into lab mice when they want to give them cancer. Clearly, this is not something we should be consuming. Although you may be consuming less fat by eating turkey products instead of red meat, you are not necessarily reducing your cancer risk. In fact; cancer risk is thought to be higher in meat than other foods, not simply because of the higher saturated fat content, but because of the sodium nitrite content.

Second on the list is **BHA & BHT**.

[BHA and BHT stands for Butylated hydroxyanisole](#) (BHA) and Butylated hydroxytoluene (BHT). These are food additives that are used as a preservative to keep food from spoilage. BHA and BHT can be found in butter, meats, chewing gum, snack foods, dehydrated potatoes, and even beer. These additives are approved by the FDA as safe for human consumption. However, they are proven carcinogens. There is proof that some people have difficulty metabolizing BHA and this can result in health and behavioral changes.

“The [structure of BHA and BHT](#) will change during this process [of preserving food], and may form a compound that reacts in the body,” says Gerbstadt. “BHA and BHT are not stable or inert. They're not just hanging out and being excreted by the body.” Gerbstadt says that they are obviously not added for the purpose of giving people cancer, but for some people, some of the time, there may be that risk.

Third on the list is **Trans fats**. This one really ticks me off. Try finding hamburgers without trans fats in them, it is almost impossible. Hamburgers taste perfectly fine without them adding trans fats. Also, those who use margarines, they may not list them in the ingredients – but, most have at least .5% in them and sometimes as high as .7%.

Artificial [trans fats are made when hydrogen gas](#) reacts with oil. They can be found in cookies, crackers, icing, potato chips, stick margarine and microwave popcorn. About 80 percent of trans fat in American's diet comes from factory-produce partially hydrogenated vegetable oil.

Why are they so bad for you?

Trans fats pose a [higher risk of heart disease than saturated fats](#), which were once believed to be the worst kind of fats. While it is true that saturated fats – found in butter, cheese and beef, for example – raise total cholesterol levels, trans fats go a step further. Trans fats not only raise total cholesterol levels, they also deplete good cholesterol (HDL), which helps protect against heart disease.

Fourth on the list is **Olestra**. This is the [additive that Mad TV](#) did a skit on, because of it's nasty side effects.

Olestra is a fake fat, used to make non-fat potato chips and other snacks. You'd think, with all the bad rap fat has gotten, a non-fat fat would be great. But Olestra has been shown to bind with fat-soluble vitamins A, E, D and K and carotenoids – substances thought to keep the immune system healthy and prevent some cancers – and to eliminate them from your system. Proctor & Gamble, the company that produces olestra, has acknowledged the problem with vitamins A, E, D and K and is now fortifying it with them. Olestra has also caused digestive upset in some people, especially when they eat a lot of it. Often, it's not just fat in the potato chips that causes problems for people; it's the fact that they are displacing healthier foods, such as fruit, so Olestra can just perpetuate an unhealthy habit.

Fifth on the list is **Propyl gallate**.

This preservative, [used to prevent fats and oils from spoiling](#), might cause cancer. It's used in vegetable oil, meat products, potato sticks,

chicken soup base and chewing gum, and is often used with BHA and BHT.

Sixth on the list is **Monosodium glutamate**. Is an amino acid used widely as a flavor enhancer in frozen dinners, salad dressings, chips and restaurant food. This additive is in my favorite asian foods, like egg rolls and wontons, so I only order chinese take-out now about once a year. Love the taste but, I pay later – feel sluggish and bloated.

MSG is [now so ubiquitous in our food chain](#) (east and west) that you would be very hard pressed to go MSG-free. As you would expect, junk foods and instant foods like soups and other mixes contain MSG. Prepared food in your grocery stores and at fast food outlets (KFC chicken skin is massively loaded with MSG) and fine dining restaurants alike are awash in MSG.

When you see the word “citric acid” in prepared food ingredient lists, think MSG. Industrial citric acid is not made from citrus fruits, its made from corn. Its not pure either.

Why is [MSG](#) bad for you?

Early on (in the 50s) studies reported significant issues relating to the exposure of mammals to MSG. If neonatal rats were given a single exposure to MSG, the neurons in the inner layer of their retina were killed. It was also reported that certain parts of their brains were injured as well (the hypothalamus). When considering various findings of MSG exposure in the rat, remember that humans are some 5-6 times more sensitive to MSG than rats.

At one point, researchers determined that rats would be an excellent model for the study of obesity after the exposure to MSG. MSG is a chemoinducer of obesity, type II diabetes and metabolic syndrome X in the rat. (lesion of the ventromedial hypothalamic nucleus (VMH) by administering monosodium glutamate) Thus, MSG is used in the lab to induce obesity in rats.

Seventh on the list is **Potassium bromate**.

Potassium bromate (KBrO₃) is an [oxidizing agent](#) that has been used as a food additive, mainly in the bread-making process. Although adverse effects are not evident in animals fed bread-based diets made from flour treated with KBrO₃, the agent is carcinogenic in rats and nephrotoxic in

both man and experimental animals when given orally. It has been demonstrated that $KBrO_3$ induces renal cell tumors, mesotheliomas of the peritoneum, and follicular cell tumors of the thyroid. In addition, experiments aimed at elucidating the mode of carcinogenic action have revealed that $KBrO_3$ is a complete carcinogen, possessing both initiating and promoting activities for rat renal tumorigenesis.

Eighth on the list is **Aspartame**. This is the artificial sugar substitute. I don't like the aftertaste of Nutrasweet or Equal, which is made by the [Monsanto Corporation](#).

Although aspartame is added to over 9,000 food products, it is not fit for human consumption! This toxic poison changes into formaldehyde in the body and has been linked to migraines, seizures, vision loss and symptoms relating to lupus, Parkinson's Disease, Multiple Sclerosis and other health destroying conditions.

Besides being a deadly poison, aspartame actually contributes to weight gain by causing a craving for carbohydrates. A study of 80,000 women by the American Cancer Society found that those who used this neurotoxic "diet" sweetener actually gained more weight than those who didn't use aspartame products. Find out more about the deadly health risks posed by Monsanto's toxic sweetener on this website: <http://www.aspartamekills.com>.

Aspartame/Nutrasweet (aspartylphenylalanine-methyl-ester) breaks down to its poison constituents at 86 degrees (Aspartic Acid 40%, Phenylalanine 50%, and Methanol 10%). Remember your stomach is at 98.6 degrees! Therefore you should never use Aspartame/Nutrasweet in hot beverages or cooked foods such as Jell-O. How the FDA allows this remains a mystery. There is mounting evidence that the "Burning Mouth Syndrome" experienced by the Desert Storm troops was actually Methanol poisoning from the Diet Coke they drank lots of, after being exposed to desert temperatures.

Ninth on the list is **Food colorings (Blue & , Red , Green , Yellow)**.

Research on [animals suggests that other additives](#) may cause cancer. This includes six artificial food colorings (blues #1, #2, and #3, green #3, red #3, and yellow #6).

Red #40 some side effects are: [ADHD, Oppositional Defiant](#)

Disorder (ODD), and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). Red #3 is used in cherries (in fruit cocktails), baked goods and candy. It causes thyroid tumors in rats, and may cause them in humans as well. Blue #1 is used to color candy and is in beverages, may cause cancer.

Artificial food and supplement colorings are made of coal tar and petrochemicals. Who'd knowingly eat that? Among other things, artificial food colorings are shown to increase hyperactivity in a wide range of children..."

Tenth on the list is **Sodium chloride**. We know it as salt. Large doses can lead to heart and blood pressure problems, as well as strokes and kidney failure.

Eleventh on the list is **Acesulfame-K**. Is a newer sweetener used in soft drinks and some baked goods. It was approved by the FDA in 1998 for use in soft drinks.

Acesulfame-K--the "K" is the chemistry symbol for potassium—is considered 200 times sweeter than sugar. While Gerbstadt isn't specifically concerned about this sweetener when used in moderation, there is a general concern that testing on this product has been scant. Some studies showed the additive may cause cancer in rats.

This one should be avoided until further studies are done to know if there are any harmful affects.

Twelfth on the list is **White sugar**. This is the one I will never give up, but I do use more honey now to cut back on my intake.

The white crystalline substance we know of as sugar is an unnatural substance produced by industrial processes (mostly from sugar cane or sugar beets) by refining it down to pure sucrose, after stripping away all the vitamins, minerals, proteins, enzymes and other beneficial nutrients.

What is left is a concentrated unnatural substance which the human body is not able to handle, at least not in anywhere near the quantities that is now ingested in today's accepted lifestyle. Sugar is addictive. The average American now consumes approximately 115 lbs. of sugar per year. This is per man, woman and child.

The damage sugar does is slow and insidious. It takes years before it

ruins your pancreas, your adrenal glands, throws your whole endocrine system out of kilter and produces a huge list of damage.

Sugar is the main cause of diabetes, hyperglycemia and hypoglycemia. It is either a significant or contributory cause of heart disease, arteriosclerosis, mental illness, depression, senility, hypertension, cancer.

These additives are some of the many reasons more and more people are turning to organic foods. Not everyone can afford the prices of organic foods but, being informed can make it easier to shop healthier.

Is all Natural “ All Natural”?

Natural Foods That Aren't

From an article in Prevention.

Unless you have a green thumb, lots of outdoor space, and the time to grow your own grub, sticking to a diet free of processed ingredients can be challenging. (If you are that person, can we come over for dinner?) Otherwise, you do your best, eating whole foods whenever possible, and opting for the most unadulterated, natural options you can find when you buy from the box or the bag. Or so you think.

The problem is, labels can be misleading. You'd need several pairs of hands to count the number of "100% Natural" claims you see in just one aisle of the supermarket. That's because neither the US Food and Drug Administration nor the Federal Trade Commission have a strict definition for the term; the FDA says it "has not objected to the use of the term if the food does not contain added color, artificial flavors, or synthetic substances." But so-called "natural" foods can still contain a wide range of processed sweeteners, lab-produced "natural" flavors and colors, additives and preservatives.

Here, we give you 7 ways to figure out what's natural and what's not.

1. Granola bars

Many granola-bar brands contain processed sweeteners, such as corn syrup, fructose, and invert sugar, and "natural flavors"—an umbrella term for flavors derived from natural sources, but which are often processed in a lab like artificial flavors. Then there's cellulose, an ingredient made from nontoxic wood pulp or cotton, that's added to up the fiber content in your bar (read more about it in our list of the [7 Grossest Things In Your Food](#)). For a far more natural snack, set aside 10 minutes of prep time and [bake your own healthy energy bars](#).

2. Yogurt

Natural and artificial flavors and processed sweeteners abound in many packaged yogurts, so don't assume that blueberry flavor (not to mention the purplish hue) is coming only from real blueberries. As always, scrutinize the label, and buy organic if you want to avoid dairy from cows given artificial growth hormones.

3. Non-dairy and soy cheeses

Cheese substitutes often contain added colors and flavors to make them more cheese-like. One common ingredient? Carrageenan, a processed carbohydrate that may upset some people's stomachs. Additionally, soy is one of the most commonly genetically modified crops around—roughly 94% of the soy grown in the US is GMO, in fact—so if you're wary of eating them, make sure you're buying organic. (For more on why GMOs, read [Foods As Nature Made Them](#).)

4. Bottled iced tea

Black and green teas are loaded with antioxidants, and herbal brews can help digestion, an upset stomach, even rattled nerves. But if you check the ingredients list of your "all-natural" bottled iced tea, you may discover a few surprise ingredients in addition to leaves and water. Some sweetened teas rely on high-fructose corn syrup instead of real sugar. And if you're sipping a fruit-flavored tea, you likely won't find real lemons, raspberries, or peaches in there, but instead "natural flavors."

5. Salad dressing

"All natural" shows up on lots of salad dressing labels, but take a look at the extra-long ingredients lists and you could find ingredients that are anything but. If you don't want to spoil the healthfulness of your salad, try mixing your own dressing at home with a little extra-virgin olive oil and balsamic vinegar or lemon juice.

6. Honey

Bad news: Nature's perfect sweetener isn't always 100% natural. The jarred honeys you'll find in an average grocery store have all undergone various levels of processing, and it's hard to know how much just from looking at the labels. In fact, according to research by Food Safety News, [most store-bought honey isn't technically honey at all](#), because virtually all of the natural pollen has been filtered out. For truly natural honey—and all the immune-boosting and allergy-fighting benefits that come with it—head to a farmer's market, where you can buy it raw from local beekeepers.

7. Ice cream

Many so-called "all natural" ice creams contain way more than milk, eggs, and sugar—such as "natural flavors," modified starches (often used as thickening agents), and juice concentrates (used as flavors and sweeteners). Not exactly how you'd churn it at home, right? If you're picking up a pint at the grocery store, look for one made with a short list of whole ingredients.

Examples of Possible Deceptive Food Labeling:

There are many food products out there that create the *illusion* they aren't so bad, when in fact they are just as highly processed as the next option. No matter what the front of the package says always read the ingredient labels!

Wheat Thins

On the front of the package these crackers boast that they are 100% whole grain with a "Garden Valley Veggie" flavor, but when you turn them over you see many offending additives including four different [artificial dyes](#), soybean oil (which is refined and likely [GMO](#)), monosodium glutamate (MSG), and other questionable ingredients most people would not cook with at home.

Real Food Alternative: It's always best to buy packaged foods plain—like crackers, oatmeal, yogurt, etc.—and flavor them yourself! Our favorite store-bought whole-grain crackers are Ak-Mak brand, and we also sometimes make

Coffee Mate

Only the food industry could pass off this product as "coffee creamer" when it contains no actual cream or milk. According to the ingredients, this is basically water, sugar, and partially hydrogenated soybean or cottonseed oil (i.e. transfat that is likely [GMO](#)).

Real Food Alternative: How about just using real cream and sugar (or honey or maple syrup) and a touch of pure vanilla extract the next time you need to add a little something to your coffee?

Crystal Light Lemonade

This “lemonade” product is rather disturbing. Right on the front Crystal Light says this is “Natural Lemonade,” yet it doesn’t even contain a single drop of lemon juice! Plus both its sweetener (aspartame) and yellow tint (yellow 5) are completely artificial. There are currently no regulations associated with the word “natural” on a food package, so don’t let this terminology fool you.

Buttery Spread

What's so smart about imitation butter that's artificially flavored and made with refined oils (that are likely [GMO](#))?

Real Food Alternative: Just go for REAL butter (preferably organic, from grass-fed cows). If you are allergic to dairy, try [coconut oil](#) or olive oil instead, depending on the application. If you are just intolerant of dairy try clarified butter (a.k.a. ghee). Since the milk solids have been boiled off, leaving the clarified fat behind, it’s much easier to digest.

Taco Seasoning Mix

I couldn’t believe it when I looked at the back of this taco seasoning packet and saw “Maltodextrin” as the first item on the ingredient list (meaning what it contains the most of). Maltodextrin is a filler found in highly processed foods and is usually made from ([GMO](#)) corn.

Eggo Waffles

These are just waffles, right? Wrong—they contain much more than a normal person would use to make waffles at home, including yellow 5 & 6 (both [artificial dyes](#)), artificial flavor and other questionable ingredients. And most of the time you see added vitamins and minerals on the label this is actually bad—not good!—because it means the original ingredients have been stripped of nutrition. As a result, food scientists attempt to add back

in what they think is missing. But attempting to reconstruct nature is a hard job, and according to Melanie Warner (author of [Pandora's Lunchbox](#)), these vitamins are "not the same thing as getting vitamins from real food, which includes a whole host of other beneficial components, some of which may be necessary for those vitamins to work most effectively in our bodies."

Lunchables

And last, but certainly not least: I was truly disturbed when I realized that a Lunchable as simple as a PB&J with fresh fruit could contain 85—85!!—different ingredients! If you were to make this for lunch at home, you would not use the majority of what's on this list, including: Hydrogenated oil (i.e. trans-fat), high-fructose corn syrup, artificial flavor, BHT, and propylene glycol, among many other disturbing items on this long list of ingredients.

Gogurt

Yogurt seems like a pretty innocent snack until you take a closer look (at the ingredient list) and see that these “Strawberry Milkshake” and “Banana Split” flavored yogurt tubes don’t actually contain any strawberries or bananas at all! The flavors come from refined sugar and artificial flavors. And did you know that the artificial dyes this yogurt contains are derived from petroleum and require a warning label in some countries stating they “have an adverse effect on activity and attention in children?”

From fitness magazine:

Don't get sucked in by sneaky labels that manufacturers slap on products to make you buy them. Learn which foods deserve the healthy glows they wear -- and which are downright devilish.

Related: [Nutrition Labels to Look Out For](#) **Gluten-Free** Sales of gluten-free products, which are designed for people with celiac disease, or an inability to digest gluten (the protein in wheat,

barley, and rye), have doubled since 2005. The boom is thanks in part to celeb devotees like Gwyneth Paltrow, but the market-research firm Packaged Facts reports that people are going G-free in an attempt to ease ailments like irritable bowel syndrome and attention deficit disorder. Shoppers also think these foods will help them lose weight.

Reality check: These pricey products aren't necessary unless you have celiac disease (only about one in 133 people does, according to a study) or gluten sensitivity, which means you test negative for celiac but still suffer symptoms like diarrhea and migraines when you ingest the protein. "Gluten-free doesn't automatically equal healthy," says Shelley Case, RD, author of *Gluten-Free Diet: A Comprehensive Resource Guide*. And these foods won't help you lose weight: They tend to be higher in calories and lower in fiber than regular grain products because they have to pack extra starch, fat, and sugar to make them palatable, Case says. Also, most are not enriched with iron and B vitamins as are other refined grain products, so you may miss out on key nutrients.

Trans Fat-Free Some cities, including New York, Baltimore, and Boston, have banned man-made trans fat from restaurants. It's created when oils are treated with hydrogen gas to increase shelf life and change texture. The nasty side effect: Trans fat boosts your total cholesterol while lowering artery-declogging "good" HDL cholesterol and elevating "bad" LDL cholesterol, says Lisa Young, PhD, RD, a FITNESS advisory board member and adjunct professor of nutrition at New York University in New York City. While consumers seem to be getting the picture, they're confused about what "trans fat-free" means: In a survey by the New York Times, people said a meal labeled with this moniker was lower in calories than another meal, even though the first actually contained more.

Reality check: Thanks to an FDA labeling loophole, manufacturers can claim that their product has zero grams trans fat if it contains a half gram or less per serving. So eat more than one serving and you could consume plenty of this dangerous fat. For example, if you eat two handfuls of crackers, a granola bar,

and a couple of helpings of cookies in one day, you could be taking in nearly 2.5 grams of it, even though their labels all claim "0 grams trans fat." Scary stuff, considering that the American Heart Association recommends consuming less than 2 grams a day. Always check ingredients lists: "Hydrogenated" or "partially hydrogenated" oils are a dead giveaway. Shop for margarines and peanut butter without trans fats or hydrogenated oils. For the most part, trans fats show up in junk food, like snack cakes, doughnuts, and tub frosting, so buying fewer of such foods will automatically slash your intake.

No High-Fructose Corn Syrup A few years ago researchers suggested a link between high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS) and rising rates of obesity and diabetes, and the sweetener became public enemy number one. More than a third of consumers now say they avoid all foods containing it, according to Mintel, a market-research firm. Many companies have replaced HFCS with other sweeteners in a wide variety of products, including juice and ketchup, and proudly proclaim it on their packaging.

Reality check: The label is often a gimmick, especially when it's slapped on highly processed foods, says Bonnie Taub-Dix, RD, author of *Read It Before You Eat It*. "HFCS isn't all that different from regular sugar," she says. Case in point: According to recent research published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, there's no evidence that high-fructose corn syrup is metabolized differently from or more closely linked to obesity than other sweeteners. What is bad for you: too much sugar in any form. Don't buy products that list any sweetener, including honey, molasses, sucrose, fructose, and fruit juice concentrate, as one of the first four ingredients. And remember that four grams of sugar is equivalent to one teaspoon. You would never dream of dumping three teaspoons of the sweet stuff on your breakfast, but that's the amount in one packet of flavored instant oatmeal.

Local This word is on everything from peaches and parsley to bacon and burgers, and in surveys people consistently say that local foods are healthier and tastier than their out-of-town counterparts. The number of farmers' markets in the United States

has increased 40 percent since 2002, and the number of "local" claims on menus rose 13 percent in the last year alone.

Reality check: Fruits and vegetables grown nearby have advantages, says Kate Geagan, RD, author of *Go Green, Get Lean*. Supermarket produce is often in transit for days, which can affect nutrients; vitamin C and folic acid are especially prone to degrading over time. But those apples, pears, and berries at the farmers' market are usually at the peak of nutrition and flavor. It's a common mistake, though, to assume that high-cal foods like local butter are healthier than what you would find at the grocery store. "If it's a splurge item like ice cream or a burger, it should still be a splurge. It shouldn't suddenly become a mainstay just because it's local," Geagan says. Local meat and poultry aren't automatically healthier, but the animals were probably raised more humanely than those in factory farms. Still, local doesn't mean organic, so if you're trying to avoid pesticides, antibiotics, and added hormones, ask the farmer or seller how the food was grown or raised.

Whole-Grain In a recent survey nearly half of shoppers reported putting more whole grains in their grocery carts. Why? "Because they're healthier," three-quarters of them said. And there's no shortage of options: More than 3,000 new whole-grain products, including cookies and chicken nuggets, hit the shelves last year.

Reality check: The whole truth is that whole grains are healthier. Whole wheat flour has 25 percent more protein, 78 percent more fiber, and 93 percent more vitamin E than refined flour. But don't be fooled by lookalike labels; buy bread marked "100 percent whole grain," not just "made with whole grains" (the latter could be mostly refined flour). Use these two steps to see through sneaky packaging: (1) Read the ingredients list (whole should be in the name of the first ingredient, as in whole wheat flour, not simply wheat flour); (2) Check the nutrition facts. "Look for whole-grain products with at least three to four grams of fiber," says Susan S. Zabriskie, RD, a dietitian for the Whole Grain Council.

Low-Fat This label may as well read "Eat me!" People down nearly 30 percent more candy when it's labeled "low-fat,"

according to a study in the Journal of Marketing Research. "Promoting just this one positive aspect of the product was enough for most people to assume they could eat more of it," researcher Pierre Chandon, PhD, says.

Reality check: Many low-fat foods have just as many calories as their full-fat counterparts. Manufacturers may dump extra sugar into low-fat ice cream, cookies, and salad dressing to improve flavor. Plus shunning fat can backfire if you're trying to drop pounds. "Fat helps you feel full, so you end up eating less overall," Young says. A low-fat diet is also tough on your ticker: Filled with refined carbs, like white pasta and sweets, it lowers levels of HDL cholesterol and increases blood fats called triglycerides. Instead of fearing all fat, increase your intake of healthy monounsaturated fats (found in almonds, avocados, olive and canola oils, and sesame seeds) and omega-3 fatty acids (found in walnuts, flaxseeds, and fatty fish, like salmon). Low-fat foods that are still worth buying are lean cuts of meat and poultry and dairy staples like milk, cheese, and yogurt (buy plain and sweeten it yourself). All that's missing is saturated fat and extra calories.

Organic When Brian Wansink, PhD, FITNESS advisory board member and director of the Cornell University Food and Brand Lab asked people to compare identical cookies labeled "organic" and "regular," the "organic" ones were rated better tasting, lower in fat and calories, higher in fiber -- and worth paying more for. People who said they were trying to eat greener were twice as likely to be swayed by the "organic" label. "These people are highly sensitized to buzzwords like organic," Wansink explains.

Reality check: In some cases organics are better for you. Organic milk contains higher levels of heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids and conjugated linoleic acid, another beneficial fat that may help fight cardiovascular disease and weight gain. "Beef from organically raised cattle tends to have less saturated fat, more omega-3 fatty acids, more vitamin E, and more carotenoids," Geagan says. Organic produce carries less residue from pesticides, but not all of it is worth the extra bucks. Opt for organic when it comes to produce that is most likely to be contaminated. You can skip organic when buying grain products, like chips,

noodles, cookies, and crackers; grains don't tend to have much pesticide residue anyway. When you do choose organic, look for the USDA Organic seal to be sure all ingredients are organic.

Organic??

In the US, the Department of Agriculture label has numerous levels – headed by the 100% designation USDA Organic seal. The US government also allows the word “organic” on products that contain 95% organic ingredients. But they could contain monosodium glutamate, a flavour-enhancing natural ingredient, or carrageenan, a seaweed substance that thickens food. Both ingredients are an anathema to organic-favouring foodies, who believe that they pose health dangers even though government scientists have cleared them as perfectly harmless.

A third category designates products with a minimum 70% organic ingredients. They can be labelled “made with organic ingredients”. But such a label carries no guarantees about what else might be in the product. For example, consumers who buy a bag of popcorn labelled “made with organic corn” might be surprised to learn that their treat could have been processed using [genetically modified canola or soybean oil](#).

Finally, products made with less than 70% organic ingredients cannot be advertised as organic, but can list individual ingredients on the packaging.