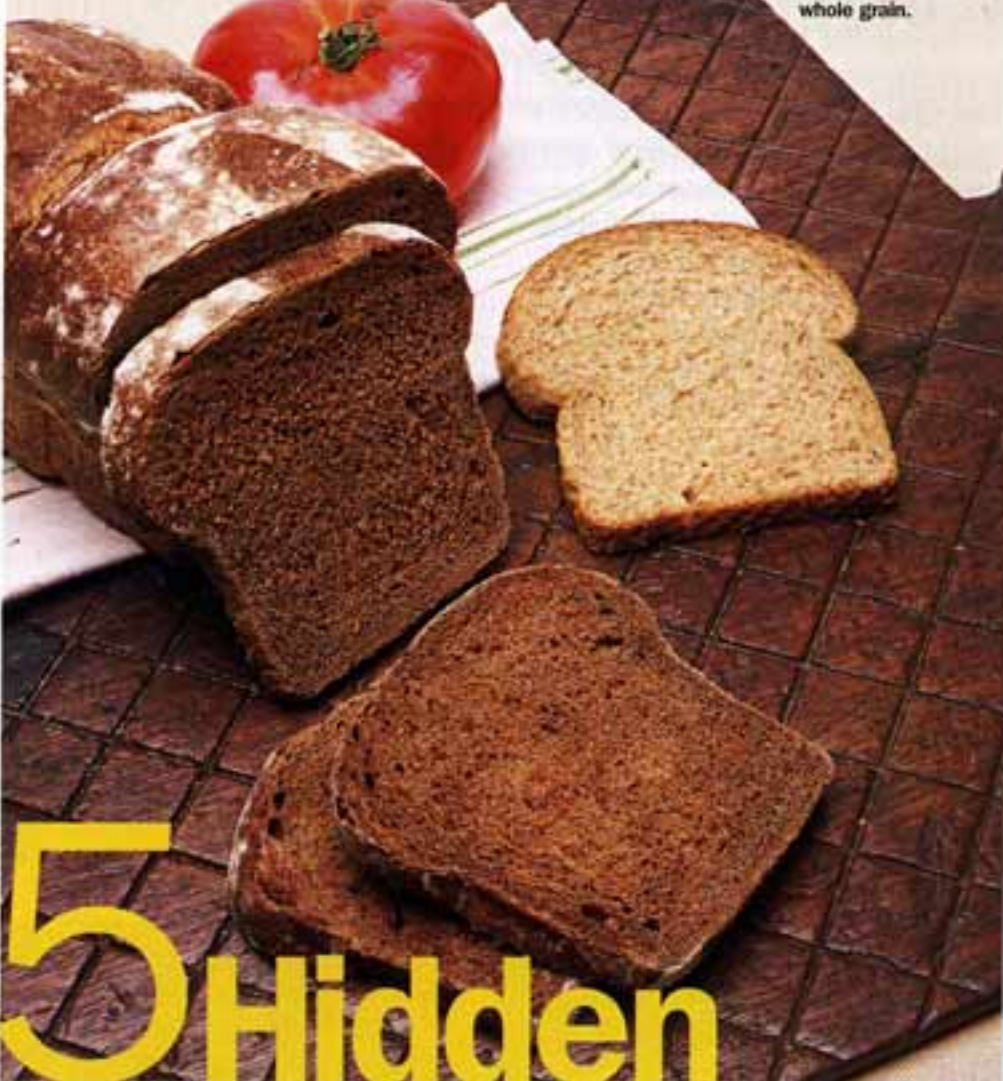


Surprise! Dark breads are often made with refined flour. Check ingredients lists for "whole wheat" or another whole grain.



# 5 Hidden Diet Dangers

HOW TO SPOT FAT, SUGAR, SODIUM AND MORE IN YOUR FAVORITE PACKAGED FOODS.

by Lisa Drayer, R.D.

**A**s a woman interested in healthy eating, you've probably consulted more than a few food labels in your time. But if all you do is note the fat and calorie counts, you're missing out on other opportunities to protect your health and control your weight. "Labels supply a wealth of information, but they can be tricky to decipher," says Lisa Young, Ph.D., R.D., an adjunct assistant professor of nutrition and food studies at New York University. "If you don't know what

to look for, you could be getting unhealthy amounts of sugar, 'bad' fats, sodium and refined carbohydrates, or even consuming more calories than you think you are." Concerned? Don't be. Here's a list of exactly what to look for on labels to keep your body healthy and slim.

## 1. Sugar

**You'll find it in:** Sodas, cereals, baked goods, bread, condiments, canned fruits, fruit drinks, jams and some alcoholic beverages, like wine coolers.

Manufacturers are required to list the grams of sugar per serving on food labels, but they don't have to distinguish between the amount that's an intrinsic part of the food and the amount they add to sweeten the product. The distinction is important to your health because sugar that occurs naturally in a food generally comes packaged with vitamins, minerals, fiber or all three. Added sugar contributes calories but no nutrients, so you want to minimize your consumption of foods that contain a lot of it. According to USDA surveys, the average person consumes 20.5 teaspoons of added sugar per day. That's 68.5 pounds per year. One of the biggest contributors of added sugar is nondiet soda, accounting for a third of the total amount consumed.

Even if no sugar has been added to a product, you'll see relatively high sugar values on labels of those made with milk, fruit, fruit juice and some vegetables. For example, milk naturally contains a sugar called lactose. This means that a cup of plain nonfat yogurt has 16 grams of sugar and 107 calories. The same-size serving of French vanilla yogurt contains 33 grams sugar and 187 calories because it's been sweetened.

One inexpensive type of added sugar, high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS), is particularly troubling. Manufacturers have been steadily expanding their use of this sweetener, and some nutrition experts have noted that the increase has paralleled rising obesity rates. Research suggests that HFCS may be more readily converted to fat by the body than other types of sugar, although more studies are needed to confirm this.

**What to look for:** The higher up HFCS (or any type of sugar) appears on the ingredients list, the more added sugar the product contains. Be sure to read the entire list, though, because products often have more than one form of sugar. Other ingredients to watch out for: honey, molasses, fruit juice concentrate, evaporated cane juice, malt, dextrose and, of course, sugar.

## 2. Trans Fatty Acids

**You'll find them in:** Margarine, fried foods, doughnuts, cookies, cakes, crackers and microwave popcorn.

Cardiologists and nutrition experts recommend that you avoid this type of fat as much as possible. "Trans fat raises cholesterol, just as saturated fat does," says Alice Lichtenstein, director of the cardiovascular nutrition laboratory and Gershoff professor of nutrition at Tufts University in Boston. Some research also suggests that trans fat may be linked to an increased risk of diabetes.

You won't see this term anywhere on a label, though. The FDA is set to require trans fat amounts to be listed on labels this year, but manufacturers will have until 2006 to comply.

**What to look for:** Trans fat in food comes predominantly from partially hydrogenated oil, and this term will appear on the ingredients list. (Hydrogenation is a process that makes oils more shelf-stable.) Vegetable shortening is another source of trans fat.

## 3. Sodium

**You'll find it in:** Soups, sauces, cold cuts, canned vegetables, condiments, olives, cereal, pizza and frozen dinners.

About 75 percent of the average person's sodium intake comes from processed foods (which include packaged products as well as fast food and restaurant meals), and most people consume about 4,000 milligrams a day. The recommended maximum daily intake is 2,400 mg. Having too much sodium in your diet has been linked to high blood pressure and causes calcium loss, which increases the risk of osteoporosis, says Jasminka Ilich-Ernst, M.D., an associate professor of dietetics at the University of Connecticut. A study from the University of Western Australia found that those who cut their sodium intake to 1,500 mg a day experienced the same bone-protecting effects as those who consumed an extra 900 mg of calcium, the amount found in three cups of low-fat milk.



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**What to look for:** Always check the sodium values on food labels. Even foods that don't taste salty—like bread or some cereals—or those that don't have the word *salt* on the ingredient's list can be loaded with sodium. Code words include *monosodium glutamate*, *baking powder*, *baking soda* and *soy sauce*.

**Food labels always give calories per serving, not per package. If you don't realize this, you may unknowingly exceed your daily calorie allotment.**

## 4. Refined Grains

**You'll find them in:** White bread, white rice, bagels, some multigrain breads and cereal bars, crackers, cereal, pasta and baked goods.

If you've switched from white bread to seven-grain to get more fiber, you might be surprised to find out that you probably haven't accomplished your goal. Although the name of the product may have the word *wheat*, *rye*

or even *multigrain* in it, that doesn't necessarily mean it's a good source of whole grains.

**What to look for:** A whole grain—for example, whole wheat, oats or brown rice—appearing as the first entry on the ingredients list. *Enriched flour*, *wheat flour* and *unbleached wheat flour*

are all code words for refined carbs. Also check the fiber content. "A whole-grain product should have a minimum of two grams per serving," says Alison Eastwood, R.D., a spokesperson for the California Dietetic Association.

## 5. Stealth Calories

**You'll find them in:** Soda, fruit juice, energy drinks, crackers, cookies, chips, muffins and some energy bars.

Food labels give calories per serving, not per package, and the definition of a serving is set by the FDA. If you don't realize this, you may unknowingly exceed your daily calorie allotment. "Most of us understand that a big box of pasta or cereal contains more than one serving. But smaller packages can be confusing, especially when it seems like the product is designed to be eaten in a single sitting," says Young. For example, a 20-ounce bottle of soda or juice contains 2.5 servings, because the FDA has designated eight ounces as a serving for these products. A serving of cookies or chips is about one ounce, but snack-size bags typically contain two ounces.

**What to look for:** Always check the number of servings per container, which is listed directly under the serving-size information at the top of the food label. If you eat the whole package, multiply all of the nutritional information—including the calories—by this number. ■