BEING AN INFORMED CONSUMER

Did you know that a food labeled “clean” has no U.S. regulatory or legal definition to support that claim? Or that organic foods can contain food additives?

It’s easy to see how consumers may be confused about exactly what is in their foods – and why transparency in food labeling is so important.

The U.S. Federal Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act requires that food labels contain information that is truthful and not misleading. U.S. regulations also require that all food products include an ingredient list that contains all of the ingredients that have been intentionally added to the product to ensure transparency.

Let’s take a look at some common misconceptions around food labeling.

“If You Can’t Say It, Don’t Eat It”

A food label may have ingredients with unfamiliar or scientific names. Yet all food, including food ingredients, is made up of chemicals. As noted by the FDA “Every food we eat – whether a just-picked strawberry or a homemade cookie – is made up of chemical compounds that determine flavor, color, texture and nutrient value.” Though some names may be hard to pronounce or scientific sounding, all food ingredients on a label must be proven safe before they can be added to foods.

“You Should Avoid Products that Contain More than Five Ingredients”

There is no need to avoid foods due to a fear of ingredient lists. When food products have long lists containing numerous food ingredients and/or additives, it represents nothing about the health or safety of the food, but rather shows how structurally complex it is. Each of these food additives is added to perform a desired function in the food product – e.g., enhance texture, provide nutrients, mitigate microbiological contamination, etc.

“Foods With a ‘Clean’ Label are Safer”

The use of “clean” in food labeling isn’t actually regulated in the U.S., thus it doesn’t reflect the science or safety of a food product. While consumers attribute a “health halo” to this trend, the perception that a particular food with “clean label” is good for you has little or no evidence to confirm this is true. The presence or absence of food additives does not make the product any more or less “natural”, “artificial”, healthy, or “clean”.

Learn More About Understanding Food Labels

A ‘How To’ Guide to the Ingredient List (IFAC)
Food Safety: Labelling and Nutrition (European Commission)
How to Understand and Use the Nutrition Facts Label (FDA)