

Beware of the 'Fat-Free' Calorie

A package in the grocery store with “fat-free” on the front practically screams out for you to buy it. There’s just something about the word “free” that sounds so... well, liberating. Modern food production technology has made it possible to remove the fat and yet keep much of the taste and texture of many of our favorite goodies. So, with the astounding variety of fabulous fat-free foods available today, why are people still getting fat?

The answer is simple: Fat-free doesn’t mean calorie-free. Some people actually gain weight when they start eating fat-free foods, because they mistakenly believe they can eat as much of fat-free foods as they want.

In one study, researchers gave women yogurt before lunch every day in a package that was labeled either “high-fat” or “low-fat.” Women who ate from a package labeled “low-fat” consumed more calories at the following lunch and dinner than those who ate yogurt labeled “high-fat.” Researchers think people feel so good about eating low-fat foods, they reward themselves by eating more later. “I can have this slice of cheesecake – after all, I ate some low-fat yogurt earlier.”

Your best protection against this syndrome is to be a scrupulous label reader. Don’t just check for fat content. Keep reading until you find out how much sugar and how many calories are in there, too. Many fat-free foods are loaded with sugar to make up for the taste lost when the fat was removed.

[INSERT/SIDEBAR]

Smashing Diet Myths

Foiled into eating too many calories by the abundance of fat-free foods? Don't feel too bad – the same syndrome occurred with artificial sweeteners in the 1980s. A 1982 study by the American Cancer Society found that dieters who used artificial sweeteners, such as aspartame, which became available to the public in 1981, were more likely to gain weight than dieters who didn't use artificial sweeteners.

Researchers believe people thought they were saving so many calories by using the artificial sweeteners that they began consuming more calories than they did before. It is also possible that artificial sweeteners, which are actually sweeter than sugar, increased the dieters' desires for sweets.

More recent studies haven't found that artificial sweeteners increase hunger or contribute to weight gain. This may reflect the public's increased awareness of the "I drank a diet soda, so I can eat this candy bar" syndrome. People are now more knowledgeable about how to use artificial sweeteners to their benefit.