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Photographs by
Michael David Adams

THE HALO EFFECT

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.

Like a lot of us, Wende Hageman, 36, is trying to eat a little cleaner and a little greener.

She frequents the farmers' market, opts for organic grapes and cereal, and buys only staples like ketchup and bread made without high-fructose corn syrup. Hageman thinks she's shopping smartly, but is she being duped by false advertising? The name for labels like "no high-fructose corn syrup" and "organic," which make you assume that a product is good for you, is health halos, and as many as 25 percent of foods and beverages on the market today wear them. "The danger is that you believe you're justified in having a bigger portion of those foods," says Brian Wansink, Ph.D., FITNESS

advisory board member and director of the Cornell University Food and Brand Lab, who coined the term. They're especially treacherous for dieters; a recent study from the University of South Carolina in Columbia found that people who are watching their weight are more likely to be misled by labels. To help you distinguish the truly virtuous foods from those that are simply sinful, we've ID'd seven terms that are popping up on packaging and menus.

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, R.D.,

author of *Gluten-Free Diet: A Comprehensive 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, Ph.D., R.D., 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

STICKER SHOCKERS

There are plenty of other tricky terms in the supermarket. Don’t let these misleading labels fool you, warns Bonnie Taub-Dix, R.D., author of *Read It Before You Eat It*.

NATURAL

These foods contain no artificial colors or additives, but they may still be full of sugar, sodium and fat.

LIGHT

This can mean a product has fewer calories and less fat or sodium than the original version, or it may simply refer to flavor or color (as it does with olive oil).

85 PERCENT LEAN

Sounds like a smart choice when buying ground beef, but it’s still 15 percent fat (about 13 grams of fat per burger). Opt for at least 90 percent lean instead.

MULTIGRAIN

The food contains many kinds of grains, but not necessarily any whole grains or fiber.

HORMONE-FREE

This is meaningless on poultry packaging, because laws prohibit farmers from giving chickens growth hormones.

MADE WITH REAL FRUIT

Just because a sugary processed food, like cereal or a toaster pastry, has a smidge of dehydrated fruit, that doesn’t make it good for you.

LESS SODIUM

This product isn’t necessarily low in sodium; it just has less than the original version.

GOOD SOURCE OF _____

Sounds like it means a slam dunk as a source of fiber, calcium or other nutrients, but it really means you’re getting just 10 to 19 percent of the Daily Value.

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, R.D., 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, R.D., 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, R.D., 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, Ph.D., 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



SUPERFOOD OR SUPER-SCAM? SHOPPING SMARTLY MEANS LOOKING CLOSELY AT LABELS.

called triglycerides. Instead of fearing all fat, increase your intake of healthy mono-unsaturated 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

fitfinds



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*Source: IRI FDM, trailing 52 weeks through 6/12/11.



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PRODUCE CHEAT SHEET

Save bucks by buying organic only when it comes to the Dirty Dozen, the fruits and veggies listed here, which have the highest levels of pesticide residue.

- | | |
|---------------------|---------------------|
| Apples | Sweet bell peppers |
| Celery | Potatoes |
| Strawberries | Blueberries |
| Peaches | Lettuce |
| Spinach | Kale/collard greens |
| Imported nectarines | |
| Imported grapes | |

Source: Environmental Working Group

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 Cornell University researcher Wansink 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 (see "Produce Cheat Sheet," above left). 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. ■