



Health and Safety: Be A Food Detective

As the parents, you are in charge of the food that comes into your house. You can't control what your children eat when they are on their own, but you can do your best to be educated about health and nutrition, set a good example, and provide healthy food choices at home.

It's not so simple though! We rely on product information that is provided on food packaging. And sometimes it seems that things change daily—what you should eat, what you shouldn't, what's good for you today isn't good for you tomorrow...and who do you believe about this stuff? To figure it all out, you must be a **Food Detective**.

When you are a Food Detective, you are not fooled by advertising claims, product endorsements by celebrities, or fancy graphics and pictures on product boxes. It means that you:

- Educate yourself about basic nutrition
- Chat with your pediatrician when you have questions
- Come up with a list of 2-3 trusted resources you can turn to for advice and information

Food detectives ignore the advertising on the front of a package:

Marketing and advertising people create these descriptions, and they can be misleading. They are often meant to be misleading—an advertiser's job is to get you to buy a product. Your job is to educate yourself about product labeling. Even though there are legal requirements about making certain claims and using certain words on food packaging, the burden is on you to read through the hype.

For example: *"made with real fruit"* is a claim that a product can only make if it contains real fruit. That's the law. But the law *doesn't* say *how much* real fruit needs to be in a product to make this claim. So even if there is 99% sugar and 1% real fruit- -the product will try to seduce you with the "it's healthy--real-fruit!" claim.

Another example would be an advertising claim of "no cholesterol"! But the product may contain hydrogenated fat, which may be even more dangerous to your health than saturated fat or cholesterol! It's up to you to educate yourself and take the time to read labels.

Food detectives pay attention to the facts, not the hype: Learn about the ingredient list in combination with the nutritional data. Ingredients are listed in order on a product: whatever there is the most of (by weight) comes first on a product label. You have to be wary, be curious, and be a detective. If you buy fruit juice, look at that ingredient list. Is fruit or sugar listed first? Same for cereal: you want to choose a cereal that is mostly grain. If there is added sugar (or corn syrup), it should NOT be the first or second ingredient.

Food Detectives know to beware "natural flavors." This phrase in the ingredient list simply refers to anything that is an extract from a non-synthetic food. "Natural flavor" can be derived from a lot of different things. Those things don't need to be listed because the function of "natural flavor" is flavor rather than nutrition. But "natural flavor" can be derived from (among other things) eggs, dairy, yeast, seafood, and soy: your child may have sensitivity or an allergy to any of these things; if they do, beware "natural flavor" on a label.

Resources you can turn to for more information:

<http://www.askdrsears.com>

Detailed info about being a saavy consumer and a food detective. Offers great, visual explanation of food nutritional label. (go to: family nutrition)

<http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/foodlab.html>

Interactive website that gives detailed information about nutritional labeling of products, serving sizes, planning a healthy diet.

http://www.kidshealth.org/kid/stay_healthy/food/labels.html

Kids Health: Figuring out food labels. Nice descriptions too.

<http://www.mypyramid.gov>

My Pyramid.Gov: lots of cool, interactive stuff.