A Terrible Ten: Health Foods that Ain't

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The grocery cart rolls by, piled with foods commonly believed to be "good for you". Soy milk, yogurt, whole-grain bread, fruit juice, agave-sweetened something or other. They're all there, a smorgasbord of edibles promoted by Standard Nutritional Advice and its brothers-in-arms, the "health" food marketers.

I consider saying something to the cart's owner but think better of it. Nobody wants to hear their food choices criticized. Besides, she'd never believe me. With the weight of conventional health policy on her side, I'd be just some nut getting up in her grill. She'd probably call for security, and I'd spend the next hour explaining to Whole Foods' goon squad that I was only trying to help.

It all gets me to thinking, though. Which foods in the modern health food store are the most fraudulent? That is, which ones do shoppers and marketers believe to be healthful when in fact they do nothing to promote health and quite possibly work against it? After a stroll through the aisles, I offer my top, or should I say bottom, ten faux health foods.

1. **Salad Dressing.** Since the main ingredient in salad dressing is oil, and for all intents extra virgin olive oil is the only healthful vegetable oil out there, you'd think salad dressings with this universally acclaimed health food would abound. But nope, virgin olive oil is p-r-i-c-e-y. Why would salad dressing producers go there when they can fill their bottles with cheap refined canola or soybean or safflower oil and call it a (profitable) day. Never mind that vegetable and seed oils (including "expeller pressed") are among the most heavily refined foods on the market, heated to insane temperatures that destroy any nutritive value the oils started with and create dangerous peroxides, trans fats and other poisons in them that must then be removed, though not completely, by more refining. Kind of kills the point of eating a salad.
2. **Sweetened Yogurt.** It offers some benefits by way of its live bacterial cultures, but that boon is overwhelmed by its phenomenally high sugar content. Moreover, commercial yogurt is made from pasteurized milk, which is devoid of most of the nutrients that milk contains upon exiting the cow. The heat of pasteurization not only destroys numerous vitamins, it also denatures proteins such as lactase, the enzyme that helps digest milk's infamous sugar, lactose. (As many nutrition-minded doctors attest, people with lactose intolerance seldom have a problem digesting raw milk.) And, as Drs. Francis Pottenger, Jr., and Royal Lee observed back in the early twentieth century, the undamaged proteins in raw milk help prevent arthritis, which Dr. Lee referred to as a "cooked food disease"
3. **Pasteurized Fruit Juice.** Fresh fruit juice, provided it's consumed in moderation, is a great source of vitamins, minerals and other nutrients. But these benefits disappear once the juice has been pasteurized, which destroys the juice's heat-sensitive vitamins and enzymes and leaves behind essentially a big gulp of fructose. Among other things, fructose increases insulin resistance in the body and converts almost exclusively to fat in the liver, making it a prime suspect for the epidemics of diabetes *and* nonalcoholic fatty liver disease happening in this country. And that's probably letting fructose off easy.
4. **Soy Milk.** Soy has been promoted as a health food ever since the FDA awarded it a health claim back in the late 90s vis-à-vis cardiovascular health, but studies since then have almost universally failed to confirm its proposed benefits with respect to heart disease or any other illness. In fact, the American Heart Association released a study in 2006 concluding that "earlier research indicating that soy protein has clinically important favorable effects as compared with other proteins [with respect to heart disease, cancer prevention, bone loss prevention, and menstrual irregularity] has not been confirmed." While several more-recent reviews of human studies conclude that soy foods are neither detrimental nor beneficial to human health, animal studies testing specific isoflavones and other anti-nutrients in soy suggest that long-term consumption might disrupt thyroid function, menstruation and hormone balance, among other things. With the jury still way out on this highly processed and highly marketed product, its reputation as a health food would seem to own more to the economic might of its producers than to scientific evidence.
5. **Whole-Grain Breakfast Cereals.** Forget about the dangers of gluten and the argument of whether humans were ever meant to eat grains at all. Breakfast cereals are essentially a combination of highly refined flours and sugar—the very combination believed to lie at the root of metabolic syndrome, the group of risk factors, so common in America today, that

mark the coming of diabetes, heart disease or stroke. Also, whole grains—organic or not—contain loads of phytic acid, an anti-nutrient that binds minerals in the gastrointestinal tract so that they cannot be absorbed into the body. To top things off, many brands add antioxidant vitamin fractions to the mix in a pointless attempt to preserve the delicate polyunsaturated fatty acids in the grains, which turn bad as soon as the seeds are cracked open back at the processing plant.

6. **Low-Fat Milk.** This really should be low-fat anything. I've already discussed the perils of pasteurization (which, by the way, go for organic milk just as they do for conventional), but let's talk about fat. In spite of years and years of propaganda, fat has still not been linked to heart disease (well, except for synthetic trans fats—no surprise there). Lost in all of this is the fact that fat is where we get fat-soluble vitamins (A, D, E, K) as well as essential fatty acids. These nutrients are critical to our health. In the 1930s Dr. Weston Price traveled around the world to study isolated populations who suffered none of the modern diseases we think of as "natural" today—cancer, heart disease, diabetes, stroke etc. One of his biggest discoveries was that, regardless of the particular diet of the group (and the diets varied considerably, from the mostly-meat-eating Eskimos of Alaska to agricultural-based tribes of the African plains), the amount of fat-soluble vitamins was remarkably higher than in the typical modern diet. So, not only is there no reason to ban natural fats from the diet, but you are very likely to damage yourself if you do.
7. **Agave.** Did the agave marketers sit down with the soy people one weekend and hammer out a plan to hoodwink the public Silk style? Seriously, how does a sweetener that is typically 70 percent fructose and with effectively no clinical data to its name suddenly become a healthful alternative to sugar? Behold the power of food marketing. Here's what we know about agave. It's been produced in Mexico for centuries, but most assuredly not in the way it is manufactured now. Its industrial processing involves high heat and synthetic chemical catalysts, though we don't know which ones for sure because the gave producers have not been forced to reveal their processing methods and most have not volunteered this information. Like high fructose corn syrup, agave contains a mixture of sucrose and fructose, but whereas HFCS is only 55 percent fructose, agave is typically 70 percent and as much as 90 percent fructose. And, as mentioned, very few clinical trials have been conducted to test its effects on health, making its consumers one giant guinea-pig colony. But hey, its got a low glycemic index!
8. **Organic Frozen Dinners.** A few years ago some scientists made noise about reporting that BPA, a common additive in plastics, appears to be dangerous at levels much lower than previously believed. Since BPA is particularly high in polycarbonate plastic, people started tossing their baby bottles and Nalgene containers in an attempt to avoid the dastardly chemical. I got news. BPA is in almost all plastics. In fact, several studies in the past years have found BPA leaching from plastics that specifically claim to be BPA free. But this isn't even the big point here. Plastics are loaded with so many freaky chemical additives that it's just a matter of time before the next nasty, formerly-declared-safe compound is discovered. The truth is there is no such thing as a nutritionally safe plastic. On the other hand, plastics are lightweight, don't shatter like glass does, and they require considerably less fuel to transport than metal containers. So, arguably, they are a necessary poison. But that doesn't mean their poisons have to concentrate in your body. The three things that most induce leaching of chemicals from a plastic food container are heat, the presence of liquid or fat, and long standing time of the food in the container. Think about that the next time you fire up them Amy's enchiladas.
9. **Butter-Like Spreads.** Wow, margarine without those wretched trans-fatty hydrogenated oils. Sounds great until you realize these Frankenbutters are simply refined seeds and soy oils blended with palm oil, and you know how SN feels about processed oils. All this processing gimmickry came about so that people could avoid eating a bona fide health food, butter. Chuck this stuff and buy yourself some organic butter or, better yet, raw butter from a local farm. You'll be doing yourself and the farmer a favor.
10. **Energy Bars**. The grand daddy of garbage foods. The ode to fake nutrition and devitalized food. The golden goose of the manufacturing and processing industries. It's the energy bar, a seeming experiment to combine the worst elements of the modern food supply under a single wrapper. Soy isolate, sugar, synthetic vitamins, various creepy "natural" food fractions, and the occasional refined grain. If there's a better way to jack the chemistry of your body, it's surely not as convenient.

References

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