

CRUNCH BITES PODCAST

BITE SIZED CHILDREN'S NUTRITION INFO

Season 2 Episode 2: Pick me: A simple guide to reading nutrition labels

Mikala: Hello and welcome to Crunch Bites, a podcast for parents where we discuss all things children's nutrition and inspire you to build those healthy habits in the home. Join us as we chat about reading food labels, cooking with kids, understanding ultra-processed foods and so much more. Brought to you by the Crunch and Sip team at Cancer Council WA and presented by qualified nutritionists. This podcast is packed with goodness and full of fresh ideas. Hi everyone, I'm Mikala

Nicole: and I'm Nicole.

Mikala: And we're the hosts of Crunch Bites.

Nicole: So, before we begin, I would like to start by acknowledging that we are recording on Whadjuk Noongar Budja and pay my respect to the elders past, present and future and acknowledge the continuing connection to these beautiful lands, waters and communities.

Mikala: Thanks, Nicole. Today's episode is brought to you by mushrooms. Most of us are very familiar with the common varieties that you see when you go to the supermarket, but it's always good to remember that there's a whole range of other varieties that we can reach for such as shiitake or Enoki or even oyster mushrooms. Some you'll find in the Asian section, and they'll be dried and others you can grab fresh if you either head to the farmer's market or if your supermarket happens to be stocking them at the time.

Nicole: So, in today's episode, we'll be looking at food labels and marketing. We know many people out there find this a really confusing space and it can be quite hard to navigate when you're browsing the supermarket shelves. So, we're going to unpack some of the tactics companies use to sell their products and chat about how you can choose the best of the bunch. So, Mikala, let's start with what are some of the marketing tactics companies will use?

Mikala: Yeah, look it's such a big area Nick and there are an incredible range of marketing tactics that are used by food companies to sell food to consumers. It's a really confusing space we know for people who are just trying to shop and choose healthy food and hopefully today we can make that a little bit easier just by going over some of those tactics and just shining a light on some of it for people. Being able to spot things like green washing and health washing is a good first step and just makes it a little bit easier to walk past some things and know what you actually want to reach for and pick up.

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Nicole: Interesting, green washing and health washing are some big terms at the moment. Can you expand on those a little bit?

Mikala: Yes, for sure. So green washing and health washing are just basically trying to appeal to people's different value systems. Green washing is just about trying to make a product seem more green and that might be like ethical or environmentally friendly or more sustainable and that's just done by things like natural packaging or kind of you know choosing wholesome looking packaging or wholesome images. Health washing is just trying to make a product seem more healthy so that's you know appealing to people's desire to eat well and to provide healthy food for the family. So, you know that's using claims like contains superfoods or antioxidants or claiming that a product is organic, and we've all seen you know things like no nasties included or high in calcium or fat free. They're all versions of health washing.

Nicole: And those claims all do have to be true, right?

Mikala: Yes, they definitely do. Legally they need to be statements of fact if they're featured on the label. So, if it says it's 99% fat free then absolutely the product has to be 99% fat free. You know and it's worth noting that claims are designed to sort of draw us in. They're usually a little bit of a distraction and we often say to people if a product is sort of littered with claims then possibly a good idea to turn it over and have a look at the back and actually see what's in that food. So, a muesli Bar is a really great example of where you need to put those skills into place. It might say on the front that it's 50% whole grain or 100% natural or gluten free is a really commonly used way to try and lure people in and have them feel that something is a healthy option. But actually if you turn that a muesli Bar over you might find that it contains 55% sugar. So, in fact actually not a great choice, not a great everyday choice for reaching for and for example throwing the lunchbox day in day out.

Nicole: Yeah, that's very true. There are so many different sneaky tactics that sometimes we're just not aware of. Another strategy that a lot of companies will use is promoting certain ingredients that they might have used in their products to make it look more appealing to the consumer.

Mikala: Yeah, that's very true. So, there's there'll always be an emphasis on you know certain buzzwords like at the moment it's really popular for foods to contain acai or goji berries as sort of a superfood. So, if they're in there then the food company is going to make sure that they make that plainly obvious you know loud and clear for the consumer.

Nicole: Yeah, definitely collagen is another big one as well.

Mikala: Yes, so true it's the perfect hook because you know it appeals to people's desire to sort of you know maintain youthfulness as well. So, you know they're all examples, great examples.

Nicole: Another hook that industries will use is hooks that appeal to kids. So, let's expand on this one a little bit more.

Mikala: Yeah so, the marketing strategies that are used to hook kids in are very well designed and they're really clever because they understand that kids have really simple wants and desires and you know the hooks so to speak are really talking to this. Young people we know are very visual, they're very easily distracted, they tend to be driven by impulse and by emotion. So you know food companies will use tactics like a cartoon character on the box that's really recognisable that's you know quite trendy at the moment for example a bluey image or toys or gifts that come inside the box or games or you know the classic is the collector cards where you have to be a committed buyer over a period of time in order to collect all. So, you know it really just sets parents up for a battle every time they step foot in the supermarket which is known as pester power. It's a basically a range of strategies used by food companies to encourage children to have you know burning desires and to ask many times over for something to end up in the trolley you know so the power of pestering. The goal of the food manufacturer is that that pestering will break parents down and then you know other hooks are simple things like product placement. So where are foods placed in the supermarket? Are they at children's eye level? Are their parents eye level? Are they near the checkout? You know are they on the ends of the aisle? You know so all of these different strategies work together to help food manufacturers boost their sales and make more money essentially.

Nicole: Yeah, there's definitely a lot of powerful things at play. It's not as simple as products just being placed on a shelf these days.

Mikala: No, it's certainly not. The supermarket is a really cleverly designed and well thought out place and it isn't as simple as we might think as consumers when we step foot in the door.

Nicole: From this we've established that the front of food labels might not be the most reliable way to determine the healthfulness of that product. So, Michaela what are some of the things that we're better off looking at?

Mikala: Yeah so, the front of the pack is the sales pitch. I think it's important to keep that in mind. That's the marketing. The back is where we find the substance. So, if we know what we're looking for and we know how to find it then all of those bells and whistles will actually just have far less impact. You know so essentially learning how to read a food label is your best defence.

Nicole: Yeah, so that's things like the nutrition information panel and the ingredient list isn't it?

Mikala: Yeah, exactly and both of which will be found on any food label for any food item that is sold within Australia because that is the law that that information is readily available to the consumer. So, the ingredients list will list everything that's within that food. It will have allergens listed in bold so it's a little bit easier at a glance to see if there are any foods in there that you might not tolerate very well or be allergic to. It will list the ingredients in descending order so that means that the first one will be in there to the highest quantity and then it will work its way down to the item ingredient that's in there in the list and I suppose in looking at that it's a good way to kind of get a bit of an idea straight away. Is this food a whole food? Are the ingredients that you're reading ingredients that you know?

Because if it's a long list and you don't recognise those ingredients then it's probably an indication that we're starting to look at a bit of an ultra-processed food.

Nicole: Yeah, ultra-processed food is something that we're hearing a lot more about these days and there's a lot more research coming out and I think a good one that we'll be doing an episode on later this season.

Mikala: Yeah, we definitely will, there's way too much to cover today. What we talked about today in terms of learning how to read the food labels and knowing what to look for is your best defence against ending up with a trolley that's full of a whole lot of ultra-processed foods but to help you understand that in more detail we will definitely go into it at length in a standalone episode.

Nicole: Yeah, that should be a good one. So going back to the ingredient list sometimes sugar, fat and salt might not always be listed in the ingredient list under those names and so this can also make it really hard for the consumer.

Mikala: Yeah, definitely there are lots of different sources of salt, sugar and of fat. You know sugar for example think about honey, maple syrup, rice syrup, fruit juice concentrate, invert sugar even just down to sometimes it's listed as glucose or sucrose. It's important to note that all sugar once broken down in the body behaves pretty much in the same way so despite the use of different kinds of sugar, sugar is still sugar and I think that using all those different terms is a way to kind of create a bit of a health halo around a food item and to try and maybe confuse consumers or have them believe that they're choosing a better option. And you know salt is not dissimilar, salt is salt but salt can be found in so many other ingredients and so you know you might say things like yeast extract or cheese powder or onion powder or you know soy sauce. There's so many other ways to include salt in a food without just using the term salt and so I think for the consumer it's really tricky to just get a clear sense when you read a food label of what it is that's actually in that food.

Nicole: Yeah, it is definitely very tricky so if we do see some different types of salts and different types of sugars in the ingredient list and this raises some red flags with us, what is the next thing that we should look at?

Mikala: Yeah, so if the ingredient list leaves you feeling a little bit unsure then you look at the nutrition information panel. The nutrition information panel will list all the nutrients that are found in that food, and it will break it down per serve and per 100 grams. So that's the carbohydrate and that will usually then feature the sugars, the protein, the total fat, the energy, the fibre, you know if they're some of them sometimes it will break down fats into the polyunsaturated, monounsaturated and saturated but essentially you'll get your macronutrients outlined for you so you know exactly what is in that food item that you have picked up.

Nicole: So, you mentioned the amount of nutrients in the food is listed per serve and per 100 grams. For people who are wanting to compare two different products by label reading, what column is the best out of these two?

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Mikala: So, we always suggest that consumers use the 100 grams or 100 ml column when they are looking at a nutrition information panel and the reason for this is that that provides a percentage. So, per 100 grams you can then see how much protein or how much sugar or how much fat is in that food. So, it's an easy way to know how much is in that food and it's also a really easy way to compare that one item to another item and see which one fares best. If you look at the per serve that could be different depending on the different food manufacturer's understanding of or decision around what a serve size is because there's no regulation around serving sizes that is set by the food manufacturer themselves. So it's important to abandon that column and go straight to the 100 gram or 100 ml unless there's one exception and that is if you are looking at the dietary fibre and in that instance we encourage you to look at the per serve because ideally if a food is going to claim that they're a high fibre option then they need to be able to show that they provide more than three grams per serve because then they are holding up their end of the bargain and actually it is a high fibre food and when you have an amount that they say is a serve you know for example a bowl of cereal it needs to know that a serve in your bowl has more than three grams of fibre and that's because you know fibre is incredibly good for gut health it has a whole wide-ranging but you know beneficial impact in the body and ideally high fibre foods are what we want to be reaching for.

Nicole: Yeah, that makes sense of why that one is around that standalone per serve column. So, for the other nutrients how would parents know what they're looking for when they're looking at the labels and the nutrients but what's the better of the bunch how do we determine that?

Mikala: It's a really complex area and it's you know there's a lot to keep in your mind and learning you know what does high protein look like when you're actually holding your food in front of you in the supermarket or how much is a good amount or too much when it comes to sugar it's no small task and you know for that reason we have developed an actual wallet card resource and it's brilliant you can either download it or you can print it or you can order a hard copy and we'll send it to you and it just breaks down all those macronutrients that are on the nutrition information panel and then we've got three columns on that card and that's the green amber and red so that's obviously you know good to go choose sometimes and best to avoid. So yeah to try and simplify the process for consumers we suggest using something like that resource because then you know once you have learnt some of the basics you'll get quicker and quicker at recognising a food that does provide you with more of the great nutrients and you know less of the ones that we want in moderation because it's all about practice the more you look at these numbers the more that they'll be easier for you to retain.

Nicole: Yeah, it is definitely a lot to think about at the beginning but that wallet card you mentioned is a fantastic little tool so we'll make sure we include the link for that in our show notes. So, one of the questions I hear a lot from parents when we're talking about food labels is what is the health star rating and is it a reliable tool to use when I'm shopping?

Mikala: Yes so the health star rating is definitely useful to be able to compare two of the same product basically the health star rating is a rating system that assigns stars to a food based on how much protein is found per serve, how much fibre is found per serve, whether the food is low in sugar or low in salt so there's a sort of an algorithm that that then leads to

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the food actually being awarded stars. So, it does not mean you can compare foods between all categories so you can't pick up a box of cereal and a juice and compare the stars on those two items to see which one is the better. You can only pick up two boxes of cereal or two different juices and use them side by side to look at those stars. So it's useful at a glance but it is certainly not a watertight system because unfortunately food manufacturers can tweak and adjust things to gain more stars and not necessarily mean that they are providing a healthier option and then on top of that it's not a mandatory system so at the moment food manufacturers can opt out or choose to you know avoid the system if they know that their product might not be awarded very well with with stars. So at the end of the day it still comes back to what we're saying here which is knowing how to read the nutrition information panel and assess an ingredients list is your best way of determining whether you're choosing a healthy food or not.

Nicole: Yeah I've seen some research that's shown with that not being mandatory that a lot of the products that are putting the health star rating on are the ones that have those four and a half five stars whereas there's a large percentage of the products that if they did have the health star they would have one or two stars sitting down at that bottom level but they choose not to participate in that program so it definitely is a bit of a loophole in that system but it is like you said better than nothing when you are comparing like-for-like products.

Mikala: And I think just adding to that the plan going forwards for the system is that it will be mandatory and then that will help avoid the confusion for consumers and allowing some food manufacturers to not be basically called out for their one-star food item. And also adding to that it's worth noting that the health star rating only applies to packaged and essentially processed foods so all your fruits and veg you know all your whole foods aren't part of the health star rating system but we know that if they were they'd be five star foods so you know keeping that in mind as well that reaching for five star foods is far easier than you realise.

Nicole: Yeah, that's a really good point. So hopefully today we've broken down some of the nitty-gritties of food labelling and marketing so that when you are choosing packet foods you now have the skills to choose the better of the bunch. And don't forget we have a range of different resources on our website to support you in your label reading journey so make sure you jump in and have a look and we'll make sure we include links in our show notes. So, if you've enjoyed today's episode please share it with your friends, hit that five stars or leave us a lovely review and tune in to our next episode soon.

Mikala: Thanks everyone, talk to you next time.