
BEYOND THE LABELS

The Food Commission was set up in 1988 as the UK's first independent watchdog on food issues. It is a not-for-profit organisation and is dependent on public donations and subscriptions. Its award-winning researchers have exposed the facts about modern food production and the secrets which the food industry prefers to keep hidden. Here are some extracts from their posters, *Children's Food and Reading food labels* (The Food Commission, 94 White Lion St, London N1 9PF, Tel 020 7837 2250, www.foodcomm.org.uk/).

- ☛ The latest government figures show that our youngsters are eating too much saturated fat, sugar and salt, mainly from processed foods and sugary drinks and snacks. Even more depressing is that many children hardly ever eat fruit and vegetables and the trend is for ever-decreasing consumption...
Youngsters today are more likely to be overweight. One-third of children have tooth decay before they even start primary school, and they are at greater risk of heart disease and cancer in later life because of their poor diet in childhood.
- ☛ For every pound of green vegetables, boys are eating four pounds of biscuits.
- ☛ Just one 500ml bottle of Sunny Delight contains more sugar than the recommended total daily allowance of sugar for children! Such drinks have been so successfully marketed that most British school children no longer drink tap water at all.
- ☛ Did you know that many breakfast cereals are stuffed with sugar? Sugar Puffs boast that they are 'nutritious', but contain 49% sugar – meaning that they contain almost as much sugar as cereal.
- ☛ Even supposedly healthy products – such as dried fruit – can have added sugars or fats when being sold to children.
- ☛ Colours, flavours, flavour-boosters, thickeners, gums, starches, emulsifiers... There are over 3000 chemicals available to food manufacturers to give their products more appeal than they might otherwise have. It is usually processed food which gets the cosmetic touch of extra colour and flavour... One estimate of the amount of additives being eaten suggests that some children will have eaten their own weight in additives by the time they finish their teens.
- ☛ Even though a product might be largely sugar and water, manufacturers fall over themselves to remind parents about the vitamins they've added, the extra iron, the 'energy', the 'goodness', and the 'carefully-balanced' ingredients.
- ☛ Cheese flavour crisps should contain real cheese, shouldn't they? Wrong. Only if they were described as cheese flavoured would the flavour need to come from real cheese rather than chemical flavourings.
- ☛ A genuine low fat food must contain less than 3% fat. So watch out for claims that foods are 90% fat-free – which looks good but actually means that the food contains 10% fat, which is more than three times the amount permitted in a genuinely low fat food.
- ☛ New 'functional' foods are being marketed on the basis that they are good for our heart or bones, or that they can reduce cholesterol, or are good for our digestive and immune systems or even reduce menopausal symptoms. But should we believe the claims?
Although companies are not allowed to claim that a food can cure or prevent a particular disease, they can claim that their product can keep you healthy. When challenged, many companies could not produce sufficient evidence to justify the claims they made.
- ☛ A box of eggs can be described as 'farm-fresh' or 'country-fresh' and have images of hens scratching in a farmyard – yet these are eggs from caged battery hens. The hens which lay 'free-range' eggs must have access to the outdoors, though in practice many are kept in such huge sheds that they often don't find the way out! 'Barn eggs' are a halfway house between free range and battery systems.