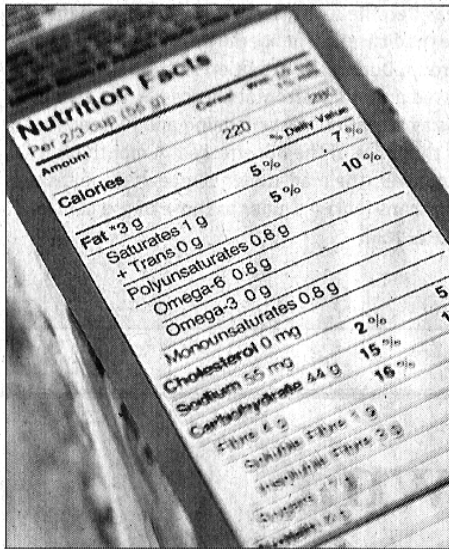


Don't gamble when deciphering food labels

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Nutrition labels on food packages can be hard to figure out.

My mother-in-law lives in Las Vegas, so she is savvy about many things. She can decipher machines that spin cherries and wild cards and decide which ones will produce money. And she knows when to stop playing and go home.

But she and her husband do not gamble on their health. So they call every once in a while to ask me questions.

"Hello, Dear. Can you tell me, what are triglycerides? Are they like fat or cholesterol?"

And she has trouble figuring out food labels that don't seem to make sense. Like the one that says "Calories: 100. Calories from fat: 45." Then it says "Total fat: 5 grams; saturated fat: 1 gram, trans fat: zero, polyunsaturated fat: 2 grams, monounsaturated fat: 2 grams." That doesn't add up to 45 calories from fat.

"Am I missing something here?" she

asks. I tell her she's mixing apples and ... cherries. Let me explain: Food labels list fat in grams, a measure of weight. So the total fat in one serving of this food weighs 5 grams: 1 gram from saturated and trans fats ("bad" fats), and 4 grams (2 grams apiece) from "good" monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats. The missing wild card is the fact that each gram of fat contains the energy-producing potential (commonly known as a calorie) of 9 calories. In other words, if I eat 1 gram of fat, my body receives 9 calories of "fuel" for energy.

The product mentioned contains 5 grams of "total fat." Each gram provides 9 calories. Therefore the "calories from fat" equals 45.

By comparison, 1 gram of protein or carbohydrate provides just 4 calories of energy — less than half the 9 calories per gram in fat. A whole quart of salad greens, for example, contains the same number of calories as just one tablespoon of salad dressing, about 100.

Now back to the first question: Triglycer-

ides are a type of fat in our blood. They can come from food or be manufactured by our bodies if we eat too many calories. For example, a typical Vegas prime rib dinner with baked potato, butter, sour cream and Texas toast is a good bet to raise blood triglyceride levels. And most experts wager that high levels of triglycerides floating around in our blood increases our odds for heart disease.

We can help lower blood triglyceride levels with what health experts affectionately call "lifestyle changes." Cut out extra alcohol. Eat less fat and sugar. Choose fish, walnuts, flaxseed meal and other sources of triglyceride-lowering omega-3 fats more often. And take more walks away from slot machines.

Like the rest of us, my mother-in-law and her husband know the stakes. Let's bet we all take it to heart.

Barbara Quinn is a registered dietitian and certified diabetes educator.