

What is a healthy good...and does it matter?

By Chris Rosenbloom, PhD, RDN, CSSD

When talking to young athletes, someone will always ask about a specific food or beverage and says, "is this healthy?" My answer is, "it depends." More on the reason why it depends a little later in the column.

Food marketers have a simple goal: get you to buy more of their food. What they know is that if a food carries a health claim on the package, sales go up. A recent survey by the International Food Information Council Foundation also found that we think a food is healthier if it is fresh versus frozen (even if the nutritional value is identical), if it costs more, if it is a brand name versus a store-brand, or if it is purchased from a natural foods store versus grocery or convenience store.

Let's break down some of the health claims on food products that might be fooling you into believing they are healthier than they really are:

- Wheat bread versus white bread. Wheat bread sounds healthier than white bread, but bread is made from wheat, whether is labeled white bread or wheat bread. If you want the healthier whole wheat bread, you have look at the ingredient list for "whole wheat flour" as the first ingredient.
- 5-grain bread versus wheat bread. The confusion here comes from the word "grain." You might know that whole grains are healthy, but a bread touring 5-grains may not contain any whole grains. Again, the only way to know if there are whole grains is to look at the ingredient list.
- Sugar-free yogurt. Yogurt (and milk) contain the sugar lactose; a naturally occurring sugar. Unfortunately, the nutrition label does not separate naturally occurring sugar from added sugar. A 5.3-ounce carton of yogurt (typical single serving size) can contain 4-20 grams of sugar; less sugar for plain yogurt and more for vanilla or fruit-flavored. A good goal is to stick to yogurt with 15 grams of sugar (the equivalent of 3 teaspoons of sugar) or less.
- Any food labelled as "natural." There is no defining natural; a potato chip labeled as natural is not healthier than plain old chips.

Back to the opening question: "Is it healthy?" No single food can provide you with good health. It is the total diet that is important. Swimmers require many calories to get them through training and competition, so if most of your food choices are healthful, don't worry about a single food derailing a healthy diet.