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Health Food: Hidden Hazards

by Martin F. Downs

Perhaps you've made changes in your diet for the sake of losing weight, lowering your cholesterol, or just for general well-being. You may be surprised to learn that some popular health foods may not be as wholesome as they seem.

Tuna is awash in controversy. Tuna seems to be the perfect health food. It's low-cal, low in saturated fat, and high in omega-3 fatty acids. What's more, you can get canned tuna anywhere, and it's cheap.

The problem is mercury, a toxic chemical that seeps into the sea as a byproduct of industry. Eating mercury-laden fish during pregnancy can harm a baby's developing brain, causing learning disabilities. The FDA warns women not to eat shark, swordfish, king mackerel, and tilefish because they contain high levels of mercury. But consumer watchdogs say the agency should also warn women about tuna. Mercury levels in tuna have been below the FDA's safety limit, but critics say the agency's standards are too lax, and that women eat more tuna than the government claims they do.

"Fish is an excellent source of nutrition, especially for pregnant women," says Daniel Lasser, MD, an obstetrician at the Weill Cornell School of Medicine in New York City. Nevertheless, "We're not 100-percent sure about how much is safe," he says.

If you're on a diet, **reduced-fat sweets** may seem like a fine alternative. Not so, says Chris Rosenbloom, a dietician and spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association. "Low-fat" does not mean low-cal. Removing fat from your favorite treat also robs it of flavor. To make up for the deliciousness deficit, more sugar is added. That may make it tastier, but any calories that went out with the fat sneak back in with the sugar.

"You may be better off eating the regular foods in smaller portions," Rosenbloom says.

Compare the nutrition information on the label of the "diet" alternative to the regular product, and beware the serving size: If you tend to eat a whole pint of ice cream, and the serving size is half a cup (one-quarter pint), multiply the calories, cholesterol, and fat content by four.

Health-conscious people may be mistaken about salads, too. Salads made with **iceberg lettuce**—the most popular choice—are nutritionally inferior to salads made with dark greens or mixed greens. Consider this: A serving of iceberg lettuce (one-sixth of a head) has four percent of your recommended daily intake of vitamin A, two percent of iron, and six percent of fiber. One serving of raw spinach (two and one-half cups) has 70 percent of your daily vitamin A, 20 percent of iron, and 19 percent of fiber.

Dark veggies and fruits are generally the most nutritious, Rosenbloom says. But don't go by skin color alone. An orange is orange throughout, but even a dark red apple is white inside, so it's less nutritious than an orange.

Finally, don't mistake **wheat bread** for whole-grain bread. Rosenbloom

says wheat bread is basically white bread with a handful of dark flour or even caramel color mixed in. Whole-grain bread is just that—full of whole grains. It's the most nutritious choice.

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