Greetings Health Enthusiasts! I’m assuming that’s you and I’m happy you’re here. Something happened last week while grocery shopping that got me fired up and I wanted to share it with you.

I needed to buy canned artichoke hearts packed in water for a recipe. There were 3 brands on the shelf side by side. The one in the middle was on sale so I grabbed that first. When I checked the label I saw it had 550 mg of sodium per serving so I picked up another brand, 420mg in that one. At that point I thought they would all be pretty much the same and I would pass, but decided to check out the 3rd label anyway. I was surprised to see it had 155 mg per serving! Quite a difference and a much better choice! From the outside they looked very similar, they were all 14.5 ounces and they were all packed in water.

For me this validates that the extra time it takes to read labels is time well spent. Sodium is an essential nutrient but it’s easy to get more than necessary when consuming processed foods. Limiting processed foods intake and checking labels when you do can help! I began reading labels when my now adult children were very young in an effort to find a balance between cooking fresh, having some quick and easy options when necessary, and having our kids enjoy some “kid stuff.” It wasn’t long before I learned that packaging can be deceiving. Buzzwords are often the culprit.

Let’s face it, we’re busy - certain words draw us in as we’re dashing through the aisles. It’s a lot easier to grab something that boasts words like low fat, fat free, gluten free, made with real fruit, sugar free, whole grain, plant based - or how about this one, “all natural.” All these words (and more) can lead to poor choices. We are looking for guidance and if not careful, can be fooled by clever marketing that tells us what we want to hear. Unfortunately the less healthy choices seem to be positioned at a level that attracts the eye. Look more closely and you may be surprised to learn that the healthy item you just tossed into your cart isn’t healthy at all. For example, protein bars that are typically found in the vitamin or health food aisle, must be healthy, right? Not so. Avoid buying a protein bar without first reading the label. Many are nothing more than candy bars in disguise. So how do we learn label language? A good place to start is with the serving size.

Given the above examples, it’s apparent that we need to look beyond the buzzwords and check out the **Nutrition Facts**. **Serving size** is listed first. If you typically eat an entire box or can of a certain item, you may unknowingly be downing two servings or more. That not only increases calorie intake, but also the fat, carb, sodium, sugar and everything else. And speaking of **calories** (another “feature” that may be proudly displayed on the outside packaging), that alone is not an indication of a healthy choice. An item may be low in calories and void of overall nutrition. A serving of 15 potato chips has 150 calories, as does a serving of plain Greek yogurt with fresh berries, walnuts and a drizzle of honey (I may not be comparing apples to apples here but you get the idea). When it comes to fat content, the number of calories from fat should be less than 1/3 of the overall calories and void of trans fat. Remember, we’re talking about the fat content of processed foods, so don’t toss your favorite nut butter because it has 16g of fat per serving. Pair it with a balance of protein and carbs and it’s a win. As noted above, **sodium** per serving is important. It can show up in unexpected places. A 2 ounce serving of boxed macaroni and cheese tips the scale at 560 mg; about a quarter of the recommended daily limit (2 oz. is not much mac and cheese). If you’ve been told to monitor sodium, rinsing contents of canned items will remove some of it. Sodium also appears in otherwise healthy items like frozen shrimp.

Don’t just check the **carbs**! Being carb conscious is trendy these days but the right carbs are necessary for energy. Balance is the key. It’s also necessary to check for **fiber** (at least 3 grams per 100 calories), and added sugar. Avoid artificial sweeteners other than those from real plant sources like stevia and monk fruit which are truly natural and easily digested.

Label reading is never necessary when we stick with whole foods. However, among all the poor center aisle offerings, there are many healthier choices. The fewer ingredients listed on any label-the better. At first, stopping to read before you buy may take longer, but soon you will be able to cruise the aisles and choose wisely with confidence!

***Please share ideas or reach out with questions/comments at joann@wellnessfusion.net. This monthly column is here for you ~For the Health of It!***

***JoAnn Begley is a Certified Health & Nutrition Coach with more than 20 years experience in holistic, mind/body therapies. She and her husband Jerry have two children (and a son-in-law) and live in North Branford.***