

Fat Free Food? The Skinny On How We Are Legally Lied To!

By Jason Minich

I love breakfast food! Breakfast is absolutely the best meal of the day. I thoroughly enjoy mornings that involve no pressing commitments to rush off to, a really cold glass of orange juice, and a hot meal. Those mornings don't come often enough, but when they do, rest assured you will find me in the kitchen.

This morning was one of those mornings. The house was quiet and the morning air was still cool enough to enjoy the breeze coming through the window. My stomach grumbled as I tried to decide between hot oatmeal and my favorite....eggs. Sure enough, the refrigerator light soon flashed on as I reached in for the carton of eggs. Now, did I write this article to tell you all about my day and favorite breakfast food? No, not at all...in fact, I'm sure most of you are either completely bored right now or have stopped reading this altogether! However, for those of you still hanging on, I wanted write this to clear the air on one of the many fitness-related topics that I encounter daily. Namely, fat free food products and their labels.

I was about to crack open my first egg when the can of fat free cooking spray caught my eye. After I gave the pan its usual quick spray, I stared at the can of cooking spray, once again, amazed at how food product manufacturers are allowed to get away with making the claims that they are legally allowed to make. I decided it's time to write about one of the many things that we teach our fitness clients each day...that is, food labeling law and how the loopholes are used to influence us to buy various products.

Today, I want to reveal a few truths about dietary fat and its presence on a food label. By now, we all should know that healthy eating is a vitally important piece of the puzzle that we need for our bodies to look and feel great, and to function at their very best. As a result, most of us know that we should limit the amount of fat that we ingest. (If you are interested in knowing why we should limit our fat intake, you can find that information in another article or stop by our studio and ask!) As a result, many of us opt for products labeled as "fat free." Let me skip any further formalities and list for you the FDA's law on how a product can legally make the claim "fat free."

This term means that a product contains no amount of, or only trivial or "physiologically inconsequential" amounts of, one or more of these components: fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, sodium, sugars, and calories. For example, "calorie free" means fewer than 5 calories per serving and "sugar free" and "fat free" both mean less than 0.5 g per serving. Examples of synonyms for "free" include "without," "no" and "zero." A synonym for fat-free milk is "skim."

Source: Excerpted from FDA Backgrounder, May 1999: The Food Label.

That is great! This law can help us to quickly choose between foods to find those that have no fat in them. Stop!! Did you catch the loophole that many product manufacturers use to make their products seem healthier than they really are? Granted, there are many very responsible food manufacturers out there. However, most of them take the phrase "...and "fat free" both mean less than 0.5 g per serving" to its most literal sense. Many products simply adjust the serving size of a food to be small enough that the fat content in that particular serving is less than 0.5 grams.

I love to use fat free cooking spray as a perfect example of how this law can be abused. The cooking spray that I used this morning reads "Fat Free Olive Oil Cooking Spray" and "For Fat-Free Cooking." When I flip over the can the Nutrition Facts chart reads "Total Fat 0 g", "Calories 0", and "Calories from Fat 0." This type of labeling leads many of us to believe exactly what it states. "I can use this product freely because there are no calories or fat." The fact is 100% of what comes out of this can IS fat! Every gram of fat brings with it 9 calories. Now granted, olive oil is a great choice when compared to other oils, but this product is anything but calorie and fat free!

If you have a can of Fat Free Cooking Spray, take it out of the cupboard and look at the back. Most of them (including mine) have adjusted the serving size to be so small that very little product comes out of the can with each serving. My can puts a serving size at 1/3 sec. spray. Can anyone press and release the nozzle that fast? Either way, this is how they can legally call the product fat free. Supposedly, only 0.25 g of olive oil comes out in 1/3 sec. spray. This is less than 0.5 g and falls within the FDA's definition of fat free.

Do you only use 1/3 sec. of spray each time? I certainly don't. I would assume that there are 0 calories in this can of cooking spray. Actually, by doing the math on the contents of my can, there are approximately 1,044 calories in it. Big difference.

Am I telling you not to use cooking spray? Not at all! I'm simply trying to tell you to not believe everything a label tells you. Don't be fooled by hype on a package. Cooking spray is merely a clear example. Learn to recognize what is in the ingredient list underneath the Nutrition Facts chart. Fact is, olive oil cooking spray is a much better choice than many of the other ways to grease a pan. I just need to learn to push the nozzle a little faster!

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