



Ontario Home Economics Association

Ask a Professional Home Economist

For Immediate Release

Confused by Food Labels? There's an App for That!

by Allison Jorgens, P.H.Ec.

Life has never been more of a balancing act than it is today. Time is often at a premium. Grocery shopping can be a hurried chore and despite good intentions, often we don't read labels carefully to make the most healthful food choices.

Food labels have become notorious for misleading and confusing consumers. Meaningless claims can be manipulated to sound enticing. Ingredients can be declared by names that we don't recognize, and nutrition information can be provided based on a serving size that we deem unrealistic.

Thankfully, there are apps that can help one navigate grocery aisles - even when faced with time constraints. 'App' is short for 'application' and refers to software used on a smartphone or tablet such as an iPhone or iPad. Numerous apps are revealed upon an app store search using keywords such as 'food shopping' or 'food additives'. But which one should you choose?

Tips for Finding Helpful and Dependable Food Label Apps:

1. Look for Canadian content:

Look for apps that have a Canadian focus or include information about ingredients, claims, and Nutrition Facts tables found on Canadian labels. Many food label apps are based on U.S. food regulations and may not be applicable to Canadian food products. If you are unsure if Canadian content is included, seek clarification from the company that created the app.

Take extra care when apps include product specific allergy information. It is recommended that you verify the accuracy of this information with the food company responsible for the product. New Canadian regulations to enhance the labelling of food allergens, gluten, and sulphites come into effect on August 4, 2012. Questions are answered here by Health Canada http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/label-etiquet/allergen/project_1220_qa_qr-eng.php.

2. Consider the source:

Look for apps that have been created by credible companies, associations, or individuals, and that reference official government regulations. If you do not recognize the source go to their website for more information.

3. Look for a quick rating system:

While shopping, you can use apps to help navigate food labels quickly. Look for apps that incorporate a speedy safety rating system for ingredients such as colour-coded happy and sad faces, or check marks and x's. Commonly, these apps also contain detailed information about ingredients such as potential health effects, their function in food, and whether they are derived from animal, plant, synthetic or GMO sources. Such information is valuable when making food choices; however, it is the quick rating system that makes an app more user-friendly.

4. Personalize for efficiency:

The large volume of information found in some generic apps may make them too cumbersome to navigate while shopping. Take the time to look for apps that allow you to add personal settings. For example, if you are a vegetarian, some apps will allow you to filter and search ingredients based on this requirement. Other common filters or specialized lists may include: ingredients linked to allergies, genetically modified ingredients, ingredients linked to asthma, vegan ingredients, ingredients linked to cancer, gluten-free ingredients, and ingredients that may be harmful during pregnancy. Personalizing an app before shopping will help with efficiency at the store.

5. Consider ease of navigation:

If you do not consider yourself to be 'tech savvy', look for an app that you can navigate easily. Before purchasing, check an apps' website for an explanation of how it works. Also check out customer reviews of apps you are considering. Luckily, apps are typically affordable, and sometimes even free, so you may want to consider downloading a few to find the one that is right for you. The easier it is to navigate the better the chances that you will use it.

Don't have a smartphone or tablet? Don't despair! Carry a book about food labels or a food additive dictionary when shopping for food. Again, look for Canadian content, creditable sources and ease of use.

Empower yourself with the information you need to make healthful and informed food choices.

Allison Jorgens is a Professional Home Economist based in Ontario's York Region and author of the book *'Read It with a Grain of Salt – The Truth about Canadian Food Labels from an Industry Insider'*. She has been working as a food label specialist for grocers and food manufactures in Canada for nearly a decade. Allison is a member of the Ontario Home Economics Association.

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Ontario Home Economics Association (OHEA), a self-regulated body of Professional Home Economists, promotes high professional standards among its members so that they may assist families and individuals to achieve and maintain a desirable quality of life. OHEA is grateful for support from the Gwenyth Bailey Simpson Communications Award provided by the Canadian Home Economics Foundation.

For further information, please contact:

Ontario Home Economics Association, 14 Totten Place, Woodstock, ON N4S 8G7
Tel/Fax: 519-290-1843 Email: nancyohea@rogers.com Website: www.ohea.on.ca