Energy Bars Little More Than Candy

By ACSH Staff — February 15, 2002

It is difficult to enter any local drug store or grocery and not be intrigued by the nutrition bar aisle. Who wouldn't be tempted by such claims as, "PowerBar Harvest, a great way to kick start your day with the natural energy and nutrition that powers world class athletes"? Others are targeted more towards female consumers, ones looking to celebrate life with every bite: "OASIS is the new nutrition bar from BALANCE, designed uniquely for women. OASIS is a delicious nutritious way to embrace life anytime, anywhere." But the ingredients make them sound more like sweet desserts than healthy snacks: "Chocolate Peppermint Stick: A fun, refreshing taste, with real, all-natural crushed peppermint candy inside the soy coating. It's heavenly!" They sound like wonderful, time-saving alternatives to well-balanced meals, but in reality they are little more than mislabeled, glorified candy bars.

The nutrition and energy bar market is a growing industry with sales increasing more than 50% last year. While consumers see them as an invigorating way to get through the day, the term "energy" on the label means nothing more than calories. Although they may be a healthier alternative to an ordinary candy bar because they are lower in fat and have added vitamins and minerals, they still cannot compare with real food. Missing are many of the nutrients of vegetables, fruits, dairy, and whole-grain foods that these bars do not provide.

While the energy bar slogans claim to give you the extra energy you need to run a marathon, research shows that other sources of complex carbohydrates, such as bagels, work just as well. It is not the secret ingredients of the bars that give you energy but rather the amount of calories and carbohydrates and the psychological effects caused by the ads, which invite the consumer to anticipate a burst of activity.

In response to the news that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration sent letters to several nutrition bar manufacturers warning them to stop excluding certain ingredients from their carbohydrate counts, independent analysts at Consumerlab.com tested thirty nutrition bars. They found that 60% of the bars tested did not meet label claims when tested for accuracy on calories, fats, carbohydrates, sugars, proteins, cholesterol, and sodium. The most common problem was undeclared carbohydrates five out of thirty bars exceeded their purported levels of carbohydrates. For example, one bar claimed to have only 2 grams of carbohydrates but was found to have closer to 22 grams. Sugars were also higher than claimed in eight products, by an average of two extra teaspoons. Seven products had more sodium than reported on the label, two had higher than reported levels of fat, and four had higher counts of saturated fat. It appears that the American public is getting more than they bargained for and less than they hoped for in these little bars.

Consumers should also be watchful for nutrition bars that may contain other unexpected ingredients. Some bars include ephedra, a natural stimulant and appetite suppressant that has
been linked to numerous deaths in the United States. It can be dangerous for individuals with heart
disease, high blood pressure, atherosclerosis, hyperthyroidism, and diabetes. According to
ConsumerLab.com, "You should also be aware that bars, particularly those for 'energy,' may also
include ingredients containing caffeine such as coffee extract, guarana, or even cocoa. Be aware
that caffeine can enhance the action and increase the side effects of other stimulants, such as
ephedra."

So, the next time you're waiting in line, feeling a little weary, and are tempted to pick-up a
PowerBar, do your body a favor and think twice. You might be better off with a cheaper and more
nutritious alternative, such as a bagel or a piece of fruit.
Responses:
February 22, 2002
Karen,
thanks for your editorial. Is there a way we can check out specific products? I'm interested in New Vision International's 40-30-30 bars. Thanks.
Rita
Michael, RN

Schneider replies:
There unfortunately doesn't seem to be a lot of objective...
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