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The NEBLINE is published monthly (except December).
Mailed to nearly 11,000 households in Lancaster County
and can be read online at <http://lancaster.unl.edu/nebline>.

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Sorting Food Facts and Myths: Foods Marketed as Being Free of Certain Substances

Alice Henneman, MS, RDN
Extension Educator

One in four jobs in Nebraska is agriculture-related — for example: farm production, marketing, agribusiness and ag banking. Current food trends suggest there is confusion about the safety of the food system (production, processing distribution, consumption and waste management) leading to skepticism and decreased consumer confidence in our food supply.

Make Informed Decisions

Consumers are faced with many food decisions based on growing practices, preparation, convenience and economic factors. The majority of Nebraskans are two or more generations removed from production agriculture and direct knowledge of the overall food system. Learning how to make informed decisions will benefit Nebraskans' personal health and finances, as well as the state economy.

So many food options can be confusing. By separating facts versus myths, consumers can better select the types of foods they prefer.

One of Nebraska Extension's key issues for 2017 and beyond is helping consumers make informed decisions about their food. Periodically through the year, I'll share some key facts to help you decide what are the best food decisions for you and your family. Let's get started with this fact:

FACT: If a food product is promoted as being "free" of a certain substance, it doesn't mean other similar foods contain that substance, or that it is better than other foods in your diet.

When low-carb diets were popular, many foods promoted how they were carb-free when they never even contained carbohydrates. For example, one company ran an ad campaign that its vodka contained "zero carbs." No vodka contains carbs. Was this a reason for buying this brand? No. Was this a reason for drinking vodka? No, alcohol can still contribute a lot of calories to your food.

Don't buy one brand over another simply because it says it is "free" of a substance, unless you think that brand is the best tasting and best value for your money. Maybe it never had that substance to begin with and similar foods would also be free of that substance. This is often nothing more than a marketing tactic for companies to use and grab consumers' attention.

Two words that get tossed around a lot concerning food

are "hormones" and "GMOs" (genetically modified organisms, often referred to as genetically modified or genetically engineered food). Whatever your beliefs about these food characteristics, here are some facts you should know before you choose one food over another because it has a "free of" claim.

Foods Marketed as Hormone Free

A food may claim to be "free of hormones" — however, it may never have contained hormones. For example, federal law prohibits the use of hormones in poultry production. Today's birds are larger due to advances in breeding, animal nutrition and animal care.

Likewise, federal law prohibits the use of hormones in pig production. The amount of lean meat produced per pig has increased due to animal selection and nutrition.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, "Hormones are not allowed in raising hogs or poultry. Therefore, the claim 'no hormones added' cannot be used on the labels of pork or poultry unless it is followed by a statement that says 'Federal regulations prohibit the use of hormones.'" Be aware, the claim may be in much larger letters than the statement saying the use of hormones is prohibited.

Foods Marketed as GMO-free or Non-GMO

At present, in the U.S., the only crops available — or will be available soon — in a genetically modified or engineered version are corn (field and sweet), soybeans, cotton,

canola, alfalfa, sugar beets, papaya (Hawaiian), squash, Arctic Apples (will be available in some areas by 2017), Innate Potato (not currently available to consumers) and Aquabounty Salmon (not currently available to consumers). NOTE: Not all versions of these foods are genetically engineered.

Before being placed on the market, genetically modified foods must be approved by the Food and Drug Administration, the USDA and the Environmental Protection Agency.

The World Health Organization cites the following factors are taken into account before a genetically modified food is approved.

- "The safety assessment of GM foods generally focuses on:
- a) direct health effects (toxicity);
- b) potential to provoke allergic reaction (allergenicity);
- c) specific components thought to have nutritional or toxic properties;
- d) the stability of the inserted gene;
- e) nutritional effects associated with genetic modification; and
- f) any unintended effects which could result from the gene insertion."

References:

- *Marathon County, University of Wisconsin-Extension. Debunking Common Myths About Animal Agriculture at <http://marathon.uwex.edu/2015/12/28/debunking-common-myths-about-agriculture>*
- *USDA/Food Safety & Inspection Service. Meat and Poultry Labeling Terms at <http://bit.ly/2hxeMON>*
- *Best Food Facts. What Foods Are Genetically Modified? at www.bestfoodfacts.org/what-foods-are-gmo*
- *World Health Organization. Frequently Asked Questions on Genetically Modified Foods at www.who.int/foodsafety/areas_work/food-technology/faq-genetically-modified-food/en*



ENJOY NEBRASKA FOODS!

Alice Henneman, MS, RDN, Extension Educator

BERRY GOOD PANCAKES

Use a whole grain pancake mix or your favorite "from scratch" recipe, and fresh or pourable individually-frozen blueberries.

- 1) Make pancake batter according to package directions.
- 2) Fold into batter 1/2 to 1 cup blueberries per each cup of flour or baking mix in your recipe.
- 3) Cook pancakes according to package or recipe directions. For added fruity flavor, top with fruit sauce or berry jam instead of syrup and butter (see Alice's tip).

Alice's Tip:

- Though pancakes taste best fresh from the griddle, they can be held briefly as you make others by placing them in a single layer on a baking sheet in a 200°F oven.

