

Healthwashing: 6 weasel words food companies use to fool you



A mother walks her children home from school. She's worrying about their nutritional needs. We know this because we can hear her thoughts. "They had milk on their breakfast cereal and cheese at lunchtime." she thinks. "But what about their afternoon calcium?"

The next shot shows her solving the need for "afternoon calcium" by buying her kids a well known brand of icecream. Happy kids, happy mum. Phew! "Afternoon calcium" is sorted.

This kind of cynical advertising is aimed at exploiting parents' natural desire to do their best for their children. It uses half-understood facts about nutritional needs to suggest that a product is "healthy", even when the sugar content makes it actively detrimental to their health.

You've heard of greenwashing – when big companies use pictures of leaves and the word 'natural' to cover up environment nasties like pollution, harmful chemicals, or plastic packaging. Well, this is "healthwashing".

In the same ways that corporates use buzzwords designed to soothe our worries around climate change or rainforest loss, beware of food companies that use words designed to offset the sugar content of their products.



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1. “Natural” and “organic”

“Natural” has an elastic definition, so it’s widely used on food packaging. Everything’s natural or has some component derived from something “natural”, so it can be used pretty much anywhere. Even lolly companies use this term on their high sugar products. And just because a product is “organic”, doesn’t mean it’s healthier – a number of “organic” products still contain added sugar.

2. High in...

“High in...” can also be a warning sign. Those icecreams might be high in calcium and that cereal might be high in fibre, but are they also high in sugar?

3. Fortified with...

“Fortified” sounds strong and safe, like you are being protected from an invading army of unhealthiness. Unfortunately it’s a lot easier to add a few minerals to a sugary breakfast cereal and call it “fortified” than it is to lower the high sugar content.

4. Real fruit

“Real fruit” is a great thing, if it’s an actual piece of real fruit like an apple or an orange from a grocer or the fresh food section of the supermarket. Yes, it’s sweet, but it’s also full of vitamins, minerals, fibre and water.

But if it’s loads of sugary dried fruit, devoid of the water that is used to help provide feelings of fullness, it becomes added sugar. Fruit purees, fruit concentrates and dried fruit are high in sugar and allow us to eat many times the amount we would if the fruit was fresh. Plus, the sticky nature of many dried fruit products makes them a big contributor to tooth decay.

5. Low fat

Many foods that have fat removed are often high in added sugar. The fat was what made it palatable and provided feelings of fullness. Without it, something else is needed to make the product delicious, and that something is often lots and lots of added sugar.

6. “No added sugar” and “sugar free”

Even if a product says “No Added Sugar” or “sugar free” it can’t be trusted! That fruit yoghurt with No Added Sugar? Check the ingredient list for fruit puree or fruit juice concentrate. And watch out for products claiming no added sugar that contain rice malt syrup, honey, maple syrup, and agave - they are still added sugar by other names.



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