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Your Health



'ENERGY BARS'

MAY OR MAY NOT PACK A NUTRITIONAL PUNCH

BY JUDI RUSSELL

You're hungry, you're busy, and you know enough about nutrition to realize that a bag of chips and a Coke do not a meal make. Thousands of people find themselves in this position every day, and for many of them, the solution is the ubiquitous "power bar." Sold as meal replacements or supplements, the bars promise to boost energy, enrich diets with vitamins and minerals, and help users lose weight by offering a por-

tion-controlled meal that is convenient to eat.

Molly Kimball, a nutritionist at Ochsner's Elmwood Fitness Center, says she warns clients to take a close look at what they grab when they are in a hurry. Some so-called nutrition bars are little more than glorified candy bars, she warns. Others are well fortified but still don't offer the nutritional value of a real meal.

What you are doing when you buy the bar makes a difference, Kimball

says. If you have just burned up a lot of calories cycling or running, it's all right to choose a power bar that is high in sugars because your body needs the replacement. But if your hour at the gym has consisted of a moderate workout plus lots of breaks to chat, you may be consuming more calories than you've worked off.

If you are choosing a bar to replace a meal you don't have time to eat, such as breakfast, be sure the protein content is substantial enough,

Your Health

Kimball says. She advises clients to look for bars with about 20 grams of protein, the same amount present in a

three-ounce chicken breast.

Bars are all right to take on hikes, or to grab occasionally if time is running short, but a steady diet of them is bad for you no matter how packed with nutrients they are,

Kimball says. "Even one a day is a lot," she says. Most bars don't have enough fiber or whole grains to give you the feeling of fullness you crave, so you still find yourself hungry way before the next meal.

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Nutritionists stress the importance of reading the labels on the foods you consume every day, including snack foods and supplements such as "power bars."

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration regulates the information food processors put on labels, and at the FDA's Web site (www.fda.gov), you can find tutorials on the ins and outs of labeling. For example, if a manufacturer wants to claim its product is "lower in saturated fat," it must state somewhere what products it is using for comparison. The FDA also sets standards for labeling such as "sugar free" or "promotes strong bones."

Here are some pointers on correctly reading food labels:

- Look honestly at "serving size" and "calories per serving." Many products give an unrealistically small amount as a serving size, and if you routinely consume double that amount, remember to double the number of calories you are taking in.

- Look for smaller numbers of the first three categories listed: total fat, cholesterol and sodium. Look for bigger numbers in the last four categories listed: Vitamin A, Vitamin C, calcium and iron.

- Aim to consume products that have 5 percent or less of the recommended daily amount of fat, cholesterol and sodium per serving.

- Look for products that give you 20 percent or more of the daily amount of Vitamin A, Vitamin C, calcium and iron per serving.

- Don't automatically assume that all products of the same type have the same nutritional value. Yogurt, for example, isn't always a health food; some yogurts have lots of added sugars and very little calcium.

- Ingredients are listed in order according to the amount present in the product. If sugar is the second or third ingredient listed, the food is high in sugar.

Some power bars are better than candy bars because they are balanced to give you sustained energy rather than the short burst you get from refined carbohydrates, says Michele Chartier, executive director of the National Association of Nutrition Professionals in Washington. Bars with seeds, nuts and dried fruit are good choices, she says.

But better choices for those in a hurry include a handful of mixed nuts and an orange, Chartier says. In almost all cases, you'll do your body a bigger favor if you eat healthy foods such as fruits and whole grains, which are high in fiber as well as nutrients.

But power bars remain a popular food item across the country, says Andrew Show, a nutritionist and vice president of scientific and regulatory affairs at the Council for Responsible Nutrition, a trade group for the supplement industry. Makers of the bars have learned to mask the taste of the nutrients so the bars are more appealing than they were five or 10 years ago, he says.

Most gyms and health food stores carry plenty of choices, Show says; in fact, the market has become saturated, and there isn't much innovation going on.

If you eat a healthy diet and rely on an occasional bar as a meal replacement, the bars can be helpful because they provide built-in portion control, Show says. But if you eat one or two bars a day in addition to your normal diet, you could inadvertently be consuming 500 calories under the guise of "healthy food."

Many power bars are labeled "low in carbohydrates" because they use sugar alcohols, which lowers the calorie count but can

make the bar hard to digest. These sugar alcohols, which have names like sorbitol, are found in many sugar-free products and can give some consumers gastric problems. "It does pay to look at

that label," Show says.

Bar manufacturers can charge a high price for their products because consumers like the convenience, Chartier says. "You don't have to wash it or cut it,

and it's packaged with chocolate or other flavors." But for the price of a few power bars, people could buy "real food," she says, and put in just a little prep time to reap a nutritional bonanza. ●

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