Watch out for fake foods

Barbara Dyszuk

Recently, my husband took me out for dinner, and, being a seafood lover, I ordered crab. What a disappointment! It was a fake! The crab came in the shape of uniform wieners. It tasted like crab, but there was no doubt it was imitation.

After voicing my complaint to the manager, it did not help when my husband said that if I would just order regular food like steak, I would not have to worry about what I was eating. But I do worry, and I believe all consumers should be aware of imitation food products.

Modern technology has provided the means to develop imitations of a large number of products. In some cases, consumers know they are buying an imitation; however with food products, identification of imitations may be more difficult. Food engineering has made it possible to copy traditional foods in terms of taste, texture, appearance, and intended use. The state of the art is startling.

We "whiten" coffee with an edible oil product, and spread toast with something that supposedly tastes just like butter. We bake with chips that only look like chocolate, and top desserts with whipped topping posing as whipped cream. Although imitation foods may closely resemble their counterparts, they do not necessarily provide the same nutrients or as much of them as would the traditional food.

A number of manufacturers have developed whey-based beverage mixes that imitate real milk. These products may contain whey powder, skim milk powder, coconut and/or palm oil or another vegetable oil, emulsifying and texturing agents, vitamins, and minerals. Although these products are often promoted on the basis of their nutrient value, low cholesterol, no animal fat, and low energy value, a closer examination reveals that their nutrient value is not equivalent to that of real milk. In particular, protein and calcium levels are reduced.

Most of the fruit drinks on the market advertise the fact that they have added vitamin C, and some may even have a squirt of real juice added. Nonetheless, the imitation contains fewer nutrients. Real fruit *juice* contains carbohydrate, vitamins C, sometimes A, and many other trace nutrients important for good health. Fruit *drinks* supply mainly energy value and a few select nutrients.

And what was I really eating at the restaurant when I ordered crab? Imitation seafood is produced by putting fresh fish (often cod) through a series of washes to removed certain constituents. This fish paste, called surimi, is tasteless and odorless. Flavoring is added, and the paste is formed into the desired imitation shape. Although this is still a nutritious high-protein food, there is some debate over the extent of nutrient removal by the washing process.

Why are these products on the market? In the consumer's eye, there may be certain advantages to using imitations: convenience, cost, shelf-life, and perceived health benefit.

Thanks to modern technology, many food products have an extended shelf-life. For example, both real fruit juices and ultra high temperature (UHT) milk are available in cartons and are stable at room temperature for several months. Why resort to crystals or imitation milk powders? The real foods are easy to store and convenient to use.

Is there a cost saving? While on the surface, there may be a dollar saving, there may not be a saving in terms of nutritional value. Consumers may turn to imitation food products in response to a number of health issues.

Some consumers have fears about consumption of animal fats due to their saturation level and cholesterol content. Palm and coconut oil are both very saturated, and are often used in imitation food products.

As consumers, it is important to read food labels carefully, to interpret advertising, and to make responsible food choices. The next time I'm craving a seafood dinner, I will make sure it's the real thing before I order.

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