

# TEXAS A&M AGRI LIFE EXTENSION

100 E. Tyler St., Suite 300  
Athens, TX 75751  
Phone: 903-675-6130  
Fax: 903-677-7222

<http://henderson-co.tamu.edu>



---

December 8, 2017

## *Clover Connection*

By: Kate Marshall  
Extension 4-H Agent

Consumers can be confused by all the labels and marketing in the grocery store, but the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service is rolling out a new program aimed at clearing the picture. Dr. Susan Ballabina, AgriLife Extension executive associate director in College Station, explains the new Path to the Plate program, which dispels myths and misinformation about food production.

Social media offers so much information, much of which can be inaccurate, Ballabina said. This program is aimed at that misinformation, the effects it can have on human health, and the misunderstanding of the agriculture systems in relation to health.

“This program is all about connecting agriculture with health,” she said. “Texas A&M AgriLife has the expertise, the whole spectrum from nutrition professionals to health professionals to premier agricultural scientists, to tie everything together from food systems to the consumer, who is trying to make a choice in the supermarket.

“Our mission isn’t to tell people what to do or to convince them one type of food is better than another,” Ballabina said. “What we want to do is give people the very best, most-reliable, science-based information. Then they can go to the grocery store and make informed decisions on what they want to buy for their family.”

Dr. Angela Burkham, AgriLife Extension family and community health state program leader at Amarillo, said one component of Path to the Plate is to help consumers understand the packaging, marketing and labeling, “so you know what the claims really mean.”

“There are so many brands, so many claims, so many words on the labels describing the product,” Burkham said. “Our goal is to educate the consumer on what those terms mean, because if a consumer is educated, they can make a wise choice on food products that best meet their needs.”

Food packages contain logos, wording, numbers, endorsements by organizations, all types of symbols – but some have more meaning than others, she said. For instance, Burkham said, terms such as “non-GMO,” “natural,” “healthy” and “local” have no formal definitions at this time and are not regulated, although the Food and Drug Administration is working to better identify what these terms should mean to consumers. Others such as “USDA Certified Organic” do have regulations and guidelines backing them and consumers can trust that every product must meet those.

“Hopefully we are looking for nutritional value, but not everyone knows what these terms mean,” she said. “Often times the words are just marketing strategies, because certain words are attention-getters, not because the product has any value added.”

For instance, the label “no added hormones” on any poultry and pork products doesn’t mean it’s any healthier, Burkham said. These industries are regulated and no products within them have added hormones because federal regulations prohibit their use.

Joining Burkham and Ballabina at the Path to the Plate rollout in the Panhandle was a panel featuring Dr. Jennifer Leheska, registered dietician and nutrition consultant in Canyon and Mike McCravey, Texas Beef Council industrial relations manager in Austin.

Leheska said she frequently answers questions on food packaging and labeling, such as, “Are organic foods more nutritionally dense than conventionally raised foods?” The answer is no, she said, there are generally no differences in nutritional value, just look for quality. Another frequently asked question is about gluten-free, she said.

“Somebody came up to me and showed me a bottle of water with gluten-free on the label. Wow, that’s why people are so confused,” Leheska said. “There’s a misunderstanding that gluten-free is healthier for you, but that’s not the case. There’s a particular reason gluten-free is needed, and that is for those with celiac disease, which can cause a decline in a person’s health. They truly cannot tolerate grains in their system.

“However, gluten-free diets are not necessarily healthier than regular gluten diets,” she said. “If you are going to eat grains, you want to eat whole grains to get more nutrients and more fiber. Sometimes people who go gluten-free start shopping in the gluten-free aisle and they end up with more pre-processed foods with refined grains, low nutrients and less fiber.”

The other big issue she said she deals with is hormones in foods, and a misconception about beef labeled with “no hormones.” “All living foods have hormones, and common vegetables like broccoli have much higher hormones than beef,” Leheska said. “There is no significant nutritional difference between conventionally raised beef and those raised with the label hormone-free.”

McCravey said people also don’t understand the difference between grain-finished and grass-finished beef. “The majority of the time a calf is raised, it is raised on grass,” he said. “Only a limited time will any of them be on grain. If it is grass-finished, he will not have any grain after he was weaned. As for the value of the product being raised, there is very little difference between the two products according to research.

“The grass-fed, however, will cost twice as much in the store because that animal is older when he is ready to go to market because it takes longer to reach market weight. The conventional calf will continue to have forage but also a balanced ration that will produce the most muscle and protein in a shorter amount of time.”

Burkham wrapped up by saying, “We know we have to be constantly learning about all these terms, as they are changing. We hope this program can help consumers in that area.” For more information about the Path to the Plate program, go to <http://pathtotheplate.tamu.edu>.

*Kate Marshall is the Henderson County Extension Agent – 4-H & Youth Development for Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. Contact her at: [kate.pittack@ag.tamu.edu](mailto:kate.pittack@ag.tamu.edu) & visit our webpage at <http://henderson.agrilife.org>*