

Understanding the Nutrition Facts Label

Knowing what is in the food you eat is vital to monitoring food intake and making healthy choices. Food labeling is required by the FDA to be put on prepared and packaged foods such as breads, canned foods, drinks, etc. The labels must have the name of the food, its net weight, manufacturing information, an ingredient list, nutrition information, and potential allergens. If you take the time to understand and compare food labels, healthier choices can be made. Food labels give you clues as to what you are eating, and being able to decipher those clues is what will help you succeed in making healthier choices.

Here is a map to help you determine how to interpret the nutrition facts label

1	}	Nutrition Facts	
		8 servings per container Serving size 2/3 cup (55g)	
2	}	Amount per serving Calories 230	
		% Daily Value*	
3	}	Total Fat 8g 10% Saturated Fat 1g 5% <i>Trans Fat</i> 0g	
4		}	Cholesterol 0mg 0% Sodium 160mg 7%
5			}
6	}	Protein 3g	
7		}	
	* The % Daily Value (DV) tells you how much a nutrient in a serving of food contributes to a daily diet. 2,000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice.		

1 How much are you eating?

All the information on the Nutrition Facts Label describes one serving. Usually there is more than one serving in a container, so be sure to look at the serving size and servings per container when portioning out a meal or snack. Larger portions increase the number of calories and other nutrients from what is on the label, so it is important to be aware of that.

2 Calorie Count

- The calorie count written is PER SERVING.
- The new label has calories in larger print so it is easier for consumers to spot.

3 Total Fat

- The four major groups of dietary fat are monounsaturated, polyunsaturated, saturated and trans fats.
- Unsaturated fats have a unique structure that keeps them liquid at room temperature. They come from plants sources in two forms: monounsaturated (such as olive oil) and polyunsaturated (such as corn, canola, or soybean oil) and are considered to be the heart healthy fats. They help your body absorb fat soluble vitamins (A, D, E, K), help maintain cell membrane structure, and act as a storage source of energy that is used between meals.
- Companies are not required to list the amount of unsaturated fat in a product, but you can figure it out by subtracting the saturated fat and trans fats from the total fat count. The amount of fat remaining is the amount of unsaturated fat.
- Saturated fats (such as butter, shortening and lard) are solid at room temperature and come from animal sources, with the exception of palm and coconut oil. These fats are not heart healthy and should be consumed minimally.
- Trans fats are fats that were once unsaturated and then chemically altered to become a solid. These fats are such bad news that the less you consume, the better. As of 2020, no foods produced in the United States will be made using trans fats.

4 Cholesterol & Sodium

- Cholesterol is an essential component of every cell in your body. It assists in forming hormones, vitamin D, and digestive factors. You create all the cholesterol you need through your liver, but it is okay to have some cholesterol in your diet.
- Sodium is an electrolyte that helps regulate fluid balance. If too much sodium is in the body, blood pressure will get too high (hypertension) and put you at risk for things such as heart disease, certain cancers, kidney disease, or a stroke. Try to choose foods that are low in sodium.

5 Total Carbohydrates

- Carbohydrates are found primarily in plant-based foods such as grains, fruits, vegetables, nuts and legumes. They provide the body with energy in the form of glucose.
- Total Carbohydrates include the total amount of natural sugar, added sugar, starches, and fiber in a product.
- Dietary Fiber is a non-digestible form of carbohydrates that helps with digestion and disease prevention. 14 g. of fiber for every 1,000 calories consumed provide those benefits.
- Total sugars include both natural and added sugars. Natural sugars are those that are naturally occurring in foods such as lactose in milk products and fructose in fruit or vegetables.
- Added sugars refers to sugar added to a product to sweeten it during processing. It is recommended to keep added sugar to less than 10% of your daily calories.

6 Protein

- Proteins play a number of roles in the body. They help your body fight off infections, keep your hair and nails strong, provide energy, maintain fluid balances, and help transport nutrients throughout the body. In the U.S., protein deficiency is not as common as in other countries, but without enough of it, protein-related malnutrition can develop and bones could get weaker. On the other hand, over consumption of protein can lead to other health concerns such as kidney stones, heart problems, and some cancers. It is important to consume a balance of about 5 ½ oz. a day from a variety of food sources.

7 Micronutrients

- Vitamins are divided into two main categories: water-soluble and fat-soluble. It is important to consume enough vitamins in your diet to aid in growth, reproduction, and overall health. It is very rare that too many vitamins are consumed when they are obtained through food, but over-consumption through supplements can occur and can be toxic. Vitamin D is the only vitamin required to be listed on the label, but companies may choose to include other vitamins. Vitamin D is important for healthy bones and teeth and plays an important role in immunity.
- Minerals are additional micronutrients needed in your body. Nutrition labels are required to list calcium, iron, and potassium. Calcium plays a vital role in bone strengthening. Iron is the master of carrying oxygen from the lungs to various tissues in the need. Having too little iron in your blood can cause dizziness and the feeling of being lightheaded or nauseated. Potassium plays a vital role in muscle contraction, lowering blood pressure, strengthening bones, and balancing fluids in the body.

Ingredient List

- Have you ever looked at the ingredient list and wondered what foreign language it was written in? You could do research on each ingredient, but if you don't have time, just look for some key factors. First, how many ingredients are there? It is a good rule of thumb to choose foods with few ingredients. With a smaller list there are usually less added sugars and unhealthy additives. The other thing to notice is what the first ingredient is and what the last ingredient is. Ingredients are listed in the amount present going from most abundant to least. If you have a label that lists all sugars first, and healthier additions at the end, you might want to rethink your choice.

Understanding the Nutrition Facts Label can sometimes be a daunting task, but with practice, you will be able to discover many hidden treasures in the foods you eat. This will help you make healthier choices and have an overall healthier diet.