

Reading the New Food Labels

A smart shopper reads food labels to find out more about the foods they eat. How many calories or fat grams are in a serving? Does this food contain trans fat? Is it low in sodium? Is it a good source of dietary fiber? How does the vitamin and mineral content of this brand compare to a similar product in another brand?

Food labels provide a wealth of information on how a food product contributes to the daily diet. Take advantage of all the nutrition information available to make quick, informed food choices.

NUTRITION FACTS LABEL

Food manufacturers are required to provide information on certain nutrients under the “Nutrition Facts” panel on labels. In 1994 this panel was modified to focus on the nutrients of greatest public health concern.

The Nutrition Facts panel, or label, can serve as a guide to making healthy food choices and meeting your nutritional goals. It can help you to:

- make healthy choices at the grocery store
- compare foods and products
- plan healthy meals
- reduce your risk for certain diseases such as heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, obesity, diabetes, and some forms of cancer

Mandatory and Voluntary Information: Below are the only mandatory and voluntary components allowed on the Nutrition Facts label. The mandatory (**bold**) and voluntary, or optional, components are listed in the order in which they must appear:

- **total calories**
- **calories from fat**
- calories from saturated fat
- **total fat**

- **saturated fat**
- **trans fat**
- polyunsaturated fat
- monounsaturated fat
- **cholesterol**
- **sodium**
- potassium
- **total carbohydrate**
- **dietary fiber**
- soluble fiber
- insoluble fiber
- **sugars**
- sugar alcohol (e.g. the sugar substitutes xylitol, mannitol and sorbitol)
- other carbohydrates*
- **protein**
- **vitamin A**
- percent of vitamin A present as beta carotene
- **vitamin C**
- **calcium**
- **iron**
- other essential vitamins and minerals

*The difference between total carbohydrate and the sum of dietary fiber, sugars, and sugar alcohol, if declared.

Nutrition information for voluntary components becomes mandatory if:

- a claim is made about any of the optional components. (e.g. “Good source of potassium.”)
- a food is fortified or enriched with any of the optional components. (e.g. milk fortified with Vitamin D)

As scientific research continues to explore new links between nutrition and overall health, the Nutrition Facts label will continue to evolve.

READ IT BEFORE YOU EAT IT!

The following example of the Nutrition Facts panel illustrates which nutrients the experts recommend you limit and which they recommend you consume in adequate amounts.

Sample Label for Macaroni and Cheese

Start Here

**Limit these
Nutrients**

**Get Enough
of these
Nutrients**

Footnote

Nutrition Facts			
Serving Size 1 cup (228g)			
Servings Per Container 2			
Amount Per Serving			
Calories 250		Calories from Fat 110	
% Daily Value*			
Total Fat	12g		18%
Saturated Fat	3g		15%
Trans Fat	1.5g		
Cholesterol	30mg		10%
Sodium	470mg		20%
Total Carbohydrate	31g		10%
Dietary Fiber	0g		0%
Sugars	5g		
Protein	5g		
Vitamin A			4%
Vitamin C			2%
Calcium			20%
Iron			4%
* Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your Daily Values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs:			
		Calories:	2,000 2,500
Total Fat	Less than	65g	80g
Sat Fat	Less than	20g	25g
Cholesterol	Less than	300mg	300mg
Sodium	Less than	2,400mg	2,400mg
Total Carbohydrate		300g	375g
Dietary Fiber		25g	30g

**Quick Guide
to % DV**

5% or less

is low

20% or more

is high

Nutrition Panel Format: To the immediate right of the macronutrients (fat, cholesterol, sodium, carbohydrate and protein), the amount of each nutrient is listed in grams or milligrams. In addition, all nutrients must be shown as percentages of the Daily Values, which compare the amount of a nutrient or other component in a serving of food to the amount recommended for daily consumption. For the first time, a column headed “% Daily Value” (% DV) appears on the far right side of the

nutrients, also. Note: This column does not add up vertically to 100%.

The % Daily Value helps you determine whether the nutrients in a serving of food contribute a lot or a little to your daily intake. Generally, 20% DV or more is considered a high source of a nutrient, while 5% DV or less is a low source. The % DV also shows how the food fits into an overall daily diet based on 2,000 calories. You may need more or less

than that amount, depending on how many calories you need for a healthy weight.

Top Section of the Label: One of two main sections of the Nutrition Facts label, the top section contains product-specific information. This includes serving size, calories, and nutrient information, which varies with each food product.

Serving size is standardized to be consistent between similar products, making it easy to compare nutrient content. Pay attention to the serving size (the amount for one serving) and the number of servings in the package. Compare this to how much YOU actually eat or drink. If the serving size is ½ cup and you eat a cup, then you are getting twice the calories, fat and other nutrients listed on the label. Similarly, if the serving size for a soft drink is 8 ounces and you drink the entire 20-ounce bottle, then you are consuming 2.5 servings.

Calories are a measure of how much energy is in a serving of food. This section of the label can help you manage your weight. Look at the total calories per serving, as well as the calories from fat. Eating too many total calories per day is linked to obesity and overweight. It doesn't matter whether the calories are from protein, carbohydrate, or fat.

Macronutrients are key nutrients that are important to your health, including these of concern to many Americans:

Total fat, saturated fat, trans fat and cholesterol are required on the label. Information on healthy polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fat is optional. When comparing food labels, combine the grams (g) of saturated fat and trans fat, then choose the food with the lower combined amount.

Health experts recommend that you keep your intake of unhealthy saturated fat, trans fat and cholesterol as low as possible to reduce risk of certain chronic diseases. Recommended intakes are:

- total fat—20 to 35% of calories, depending on age
- saturated fat—less than 10% of calories
- trans fat—1% or less of calories
- cholesterol—less than 300 milligrams a day

Beginning January 1, 2006 all food labels were required to include information on trans fat. Only a gram amount is listed, because there is no Dietary Reference Intake (DRI) for trans fat. While

scientific reports have confirmed the relationship between trans fat and an increased risk of coronary heart disease, none of the reports have recommended an amount of trans fat that FDA could use to establish a Dietary Reference Intake. Without a DRI, a % DV cannot be calculated.

Saturated fats do have a % DV, however. To choose foods low in unhealthy saturated fat and cholesterol, use the Quick Guide to % DV. It says that 5% DV or less is a low source and 20% DV or more is a high source.

You don't have to give up a favorite food to eat a healthy diet. Use the % DV to make dietary trade-offs with other foods throughout the day. When a food you like is high in any of these blood cholesterol-raising components, balance it with foods that are low in them at other times of the day.

Sodium should be limited to reduce your risk of high blood pressure and certain chronic diseases. The 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends consuming only 1 teaspoon of salt per day, which is less than 2,300 milligrams (mg) of sodium. Certain people should consume only 1,500 mg of sodium daily. This includes ALL salt and sodium eaten.

Total carbohydrate, an important source of energy for the body, includes dietary fiber, sugars and sugar alcohol (if declared). The Dietary Reference Intakes (DRIs) recommend a minimum daily intake of 130 grams of total carbohydrate. This amount is based on 2,000 calories, but can vary, depending on your daily intake of fat and protein.

Dietary fiber promotes healthy bowel function. Lack of dietary fiber has been linked to increased risk of certain types of cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and obesity. Vegetables, fruits, and whole grains are rich in dietary fiber, so choose them often. The DRI for fiber is 25 grams per day for adult women and 38 grams per day for adult men.

Sugars include naturally occurring sugars (like those in fruit and milk) as well as those added to a food or drink. Check the ingredient list for specifics on added sugars. Look for a form of sugar (e.g. sucrose, high fructose corn syrup, maltodextrin) in the first three ingredients.

No Daily Value has been established for sugars, because no recommendation has been made for the total sugar intake in a day.

Protein supplies energy and amino acids, which build, repair and maintain every cell in your body. Protein is a macronutrient that most Americans get more of than they need. Therefore, a % Daily Value is not required on the label, unless a nutrient claim is made (e.g. “high in protein”) or the food is meant for use by infants and children under age four.

Micronutrients include several important vitamins and minerals that are lacking in Americans’ diets. These could improve health and help to reduce the risk of some diseases and health concerns. Your goal for these micronutrients (vitamins A and C and the minerals, calcium and iron) is to get 100% of the Daily Value every day from the foods you eat.

The following micronutrients are optional on the Nutrition Facts label:

Vitamin A keeps eyes and skin healthy and helps to protect against infections. The DRI recommends consuming 5,000 IUs every day.

Vitamin C helps heal cuts and wounds, keeps teeth and gums healthy, and aids in iron absorption. It is abundant in many fruits and vegetables. The DRI is 60 mgs per day.

Calcium builds stronger bones and teeth and maintains bone mass. It also helps muscles and nerves to work properly, helps the blood to clot and may help to reduce weight gain. The DRIs recommend a calcium intake between 1,000 and 1,300 milligrams (mg) per day, depending on gender and age. The % DV for calcium on food labels is calculated using 1,000 mgs per day.

The amount of calcium in milk, whether skim or whole, is generally the same per serving. However, the amount of calcium in the same size yogurt container can vary from 20% to 45% DV.

Iron helps carry oxygen in the blood, supports a healthy immune system, and helps in brain development. Iron deficiency, which can result in anemia, fatigue and infections, is the most common nutrient deficiency in the United States. The DRIs recommend an iron intake of 8 to 18 mgs per day, depending on gender and age. The recommendation is more for women who are pregnant or nursing.

Aim to reach 100% of the Daily Value for the vitamins and minerals in all the foods you eat.

Bottom Section of the Label: All food labels must carry a footnote saying “Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet.” The remaining part of the footnote is not required if the size of the label is too small.

When the full footnote is used on larger packages, it is always in the same format regardless of the product. It includes a sentence noting that a person’s individual nutrient goals are based on his or her calorie needs, followed by the daily values for selected nutrients for a 2,000- and a 2,500-calorie diet.

Notice that daily values for cholesterol and sodium remain the same for both calorie levels. The other nutrient values are higher for the 2,500 calorie diet.

Other optional information includes the number of calories per gram of fat (9) and carbohydrate and protein (4). The total number of calories per serving is determined by multiplying the calories per gram by the number of grams per serving.

OTHER LABELING INFORMATION

Ingredients List: If a food is made with more than one ingredient, then the food manufacturer is required to have an ingredients list on the label. Like a recipe, this tells what’s in the food. All ingredients are listed in order of weight, or concentration, with the largest amount listed first and the smallest amount listed last.

People with the following special food needs find the ingredients list very useful:

- food sensitivities (allergies or intolerances)
 - peanuts
 - eggs
 - lactose (milk sugar)
 - wheat
 - sulfites
 - certain artificial colors
- religious or other restrictions requiring avoidance of pork, shellfish, or other meat
- vegans avoiding food made with ingredients from animal sources

For more specific information, write or call the food manufacturer. Most of them have a toll-free number that you can call to have your questions answered.

Health Claim: If a food, food components or nutrients, lowers the risk for some chronic diseases, then a health claim can be made on the label. Regulated by FDA, this optional information must be supported by scientific evidence linking the food or nutrients to a specific health condition such as:

- sodium and hypertension
- potassium and risk of high blood pressure and stroke
- calcium and osteoporosis
- dietary fat and cancer

Structure/Function Claim: If a food or nutrient maintains or supports a normal body function, then a structure/function claim can be made describing how your health may be affected. Examples are:

- supports a healthy immune system
- helps promote urinary tract health
- helps maintain bone health

Although these claims must be truthful and not misleading, FDA neither approves nor reviews them. However, this disclaimer must be included: "This statement has not been evaluated by the FDA. This product is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure or prevent any disease."

FOOD LABELING EXEMPTIONS

Some foods are not required to have food labeling on them. This includes foods from restaurants, hospitals, airlines, small businesses, vendors and vending machines, bulk foods not to be resold,

spices, food colors, plain coffee and tea, etc. In addition, stores often voluntarily display nutrition information on raw fruits, vegetables, seafood, and single-ingredient items such as chicken breasts.

For more information on food labeling request: [HGIC 4057, Determining Nutritional Value of Foods](#); [HGIC 4058, Food Labels: Fat and Cholesterol](#); [HGIC 4059, Food Labels: Carbohydrates](#); [HGIC 4060, Serving Sizes for Special Diets](#); [HGIC 4061, Nutrient Claims on Food Labels](#); and [HGIC 4062, Nutrient Density](#).

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