

Understanding the Food Label

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On the packaging of food and beverage items you'll find a few different mandatory labels. Typically, on the back or side of the packages are the Nutrition Facts label and ingredients lists. These together make the food label.

Why is the food label important?

Food labels provide consumers with information about the ingredients and nutritional composition of the product. By law all packaged or processed food must indicate nutritional information.

The Nutrition Labeling and Education Act (NLEA) was passed in 1990. This act requires food manufacturers to declare levels or certain nutrients on food labels. The objective of the NLEA is to provide consistent, understandable, and usable labels that can help consumers make healthy food choices. The requirements of the Nutrition Facts label were updated in 2016.

Food labels:

- Are a source of nutrition information
- Identify the ingredients in the product
- Help you become familiar with a product you are buying for the first time
- Allow you to verify a claim on the label (fat-free, sugar-free, high in fiber, etc.)
- Help you compare different brands of the same product
- Allow you to examine foods for allergens, additives, or ingredients you should avoid
- Help you determine if nutrients have been added or removed from the product

Parts of the Nutrition Facts Label

Knowing the parts of the Nutrition Facts label and how to decipher them helps us understand the nutrition information in much the same way that the table of contents tells us what is inside a book. There are four main parts of a label that provide us with information to help make informed choices. These include:

- Serving size
- Calories
- Nutrients
- Percent daily value

Serving Size

The serving size is listed at the top of the food label. It tells you the amount of food that counts as a serving and the total number of servings in the package. They are standardized to compare related items. Cups, pieces, and grams are some of the units used to indicate the serving size. It is important to note that the serving size is not a recommendation of how much to eat. If modifying your diet, be mindful that consuming more or less than the serving size listed also means consuming more or less of the nutrient components listed per serving size.

Calories

Calories are a measure of how much energy a food provides a person. Different types of food provide our bodies with different amounts of energy. Protein and carbohydrates provide 4 calories per gram, fats provide 9 calories per gram, and alcohol provides

Nutrition Facts	
4 servings per container	
Serving size	1 cup (227g)
Amount per serving	
Calories	280
	% Daily Value*
Total Fat 9g	12%
Saturated Fat 4.5g	23%
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 35mg	12%
Sodium 850mg	37%
Total Carbohydrate 34g	12%
Dietary Fiber 4g	14%
Total Sugars 6g	
Includes 0g Added Sugars	0%
Protein 15g	
Vitamin D 0mcg	0%
Calcium 320mg	25%
Iron 1.6mg	8%
Potassium 510mg	10%

* 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.

7 calories per gram. Calorie recommendations are different for each person.

The number of calories someone needs depends on:

- Age
- Sex
- Height
- Weight
- Physical activity level
- State of health (illness, injury)

Nutrients

The bulk of the Nutrition Facts label includes the breakdown of nutrients provided by the product. These include fat, cholesterol, sodium, carbohydrates, protein, and vitamins and minerals. Also listed are further breakdowns of these nutrients that impact your health. These include saturated fat, dietary fiber, and added sugars.

This section helps support your personal dietary needs. It helps describe what makes up the food or beverage item so you can look for products that contain more of what you do want and less of what you don't want.

Dietary fiber is listed under "Total Carbohydrates." Surveys indicate only about 5% of the American adult population meets recommended intakes for fiber. Consider prioritizing products with a high percentage of these but start slow. Increasing fiber intake should also include increased water consumption, which helps benefit digestive health. Adequate dietary fiber intake is also associated with reduced risk of prominent health conditions in the United States such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and some cancers.

The vitamins and minerals listed towards the bottom of the nutrition facts label are of important consideration. Manufacturers have the choice to list other micronutrients included in their product if they so choose. Vitamin D, calcium, iron, and potassium are always included on the label. Deficiencies of these nutrients are common in the American diet. Intake of these micronutrients are associated with reduced risk of health conditions such as high blood pressure and osteoporosis. Consider prioritizing food high in these nutrients to reach your daily goal.

By focusing on components to prioritize in our diet, we can naturally limit those that do not provide health benefits. The U.S. Dietary Guidelines recommend that *added sugars* contribute less than 10% of total calories in a day. It is also recommended to limit *saturated fat* to less than 10% of calories per day and *sodium* to less than 2,300 mg per day for adults. These amounts may differ with diagnoses of some health conditions.

Percent Daily Value

To the far right of the Nutrition Facts Label you will see percentages. These numbers tell the percentage of calories of an entire day that this nutrient provides. This percentage is based on a 2,000-calorie/day diet. For quick reference, 5% or less is considered "low" and 20% or more is considered "high" for the amount per serving. Some foods to prioritize "high" choices include dietary fiber, vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium, and iron.

Ingredients List

The ingredients list is typically below or to the side of the nutrition facts label. This section gives a breakdown of ingredients found in the packaged food or beverage item. Ingredients are listed on food labels in the order of the items that weigh the most to items that weigh the least. Items that weigh the most in the product are listed first and items that weigh the least are listed at the bottom.

This section is important for identifying foods for those that have an allergy or hypersensitivity. The Food Allergen Labeling Consumer Protection Act (FALCPA) requires that foods with any of the nine major allergens be specifically labeled to identify the allergen. The nine major allergens are milk, egg, fish, crustacean shellfish, tree nuts, wheat, peanuts, soybeans, and sesame.

Additional Food Labeling

Food packaging may include additional phrases related to their contents. For example, a package may state "reduced sodium" on the front. There are guidelines the food or drink must meet to include these labels. These phrases are related to the amount of a specific nutrient per serving or may compare the item to the original. The table below represents some common phrases with a brief explanation of the meaning.

Table 1. Common label phrases.

Calories
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Calorie-free: less-than 5 calories/serving ▪ Low calorie: less-than 40 calories/serving ▪ Reduced calories: at least 25% fewer calories compared to original item
Sugar
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sugar free: less-than 0.5g ▪ Reduced: at least 25% fewer grams of sugar compared
Fiber
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ High fiber: 5g or more ▪ Good source of fiber: 2.5 - 4.9g ▪ More or added fiber: at least 2.5g more compared to original item
Sodium
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sodium/salt free: less-than 5mg sodium ▪ Very low sodium: less-than 35mg sodium ▪ Low sodium: less-than 140mg sodium ▪ Reduced: at least 25% less sodium compared to original item ▪ Light: 50% less sodium compared to original item
Fat
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fat free: less-than 0.5g fat ▪ Low fat: 3g fat or less ▪ Reduced fat: 25% less fat than compared to original item
Cholesterol
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cholesterol free: less-than 2mg cholesterol + 2g or less of saturated fat ▪ Low cholesterol: 20mg or less of cholesterol + 2g or less of saturated fat ▪ Reduced cholesterol: at least 25% less cholesterol + 2g or less of saturated fat

Important Consideration of the Food Label

Understanding the information presented to you on a food label empowers you to make an informed decision. It is important to look at the product as a whole. An item with a reduced nutrient may make up for what is lost with an increase in another nutrient. For example, foods labeled “low-fat” include added sugar or sodium to make up for the flavor that is lost with the fat. Looking at the label can help you prioritize nutrients to promote your health.

References

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