

# Understanding the Food Label

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## 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 nutrition information.

The Nutrition Labeling and Education Act (NLEA) was passed in 1990. This act requires food manufacturers to declare levels of 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.

Many consumers are not aware of the wealth of nutrition information on food labels and, as a result, may not use the information to make informed choices.

A recent study shows that for consumers to benefit from food label information, especially serving size and Percent Daily Values, labels must be easy to understand. With an understanding of the components of the food label and a little practice, anyone can learn to make more healthful food choices.

## Why look at food labels?

- As a source of nutrition information
- To identify the ingredients in the product
- To become familiar with a product you are buying for the first time
- To verify a claim on the label (for example, fat-free, no trans fat, or high in fiber)
- To compare different brands of the same product
- To examine foods for allergens, additives, or ingredients you should avoid
- To determine if nutrients have been added or removed from the product

## Parts of the food label

Knowing the parts of the food label helps us understand the nutrition information in much the same way that knowing the parts of a vehicle helps us better understand the mechanics of the car. You can also think of the food label as the content section of a book—it tells what’s inside the book.

Six main parts of a food label provide us with information that helps us make informed choices:

- Serving size
- Calories
- Nutrients to limit
- Nutrients to get enough of
- Footnote
- Percent Daily Value

## Sample Label for Macaroni & Cheese

Nutrition Facts	
Serving Size 1 cup (228g)	
Servings Per Container 2	
Amount Per Serving	
<b>Calories</b> 250	Calories from Fat 110
% Daily Value*	
<b>Total Fat</b> 12g	18%
Saturated Fat 3g	15%
Trans Fat 3g	
<b>Cholesterol</b> 30mg	10%
<b>Sodium</b> 470mg	20%
<b>Total Carbohydrate</b> 31g	10%
Dietary Fiber 0g	0%
Sugars 5g	
<b>Protein</b> 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

US Food and Drug Administration.

*Don't get confused. Some people think that if a bag or package is small it can be considered a serving, but that is not always true.*

### SERVING SIZE

The serving size is the first item to check on a food label. It tells you the amount of food that is counted as a serving and the number of servings in the package. Cups, pieces, and grams are some of the units used to indicate the serving size. The size of the serving on the food package is directly related to the number of calories and all the nutrients listed on the top part of the label. For example, on a box of Wheat Thin crackers, the serving size is 18 crackers or 30 grams. If you eat 18 of these crackers, you will get the amounts of calories, total fat, cholesterol, total carbohydrates, protein, vitamins, and minerals listed on the label. If, however, you eat twice as many crackers, or two times the serving size, you will have to double the nutrients and calories listed on the box.

Don't get confused. Some people think that if a bag or package is small it can be considered a serving, but that is not always true. Read the first part of the label to see what counts for a serving.

Paying attention to the serving size on a food label is important because the amount of food we eat today, or the portion size, has increased dramatically over the past 20 years. We have become accustomed to "mega," "biggie," and "supersize" portions. The serving size on food labels provides us with a reality check that makes us aware of standard serving sizes and helps us keep our food consumption in check.

Remember that serving sizes do not always match the serving sizes from the Food Guide Pyramid.

### CALORIES

Calories are a measure of how much energy a food provides a person. The number of servings of a food you eat determines the amount of calories.

Foods rich in carbohydrates, protein, and fat provide the body with energy. Protein and carbohydrates provide 4 calories per gram; fats provide 9 calories per gram. Alcohol provides the body with about 7 grams of calories. If we take in more calories than we burn, those calories are stored as fat. Taking in more calories than we burn can lead to overweight and obesity.

The amount of calories you need daily depends on

- Age
- Height
- Weight
- Physical activity

If you are very active you may need more calories than someone who is not active. Knowing how many calories you consume each day is important to maintaining a healthful weight.

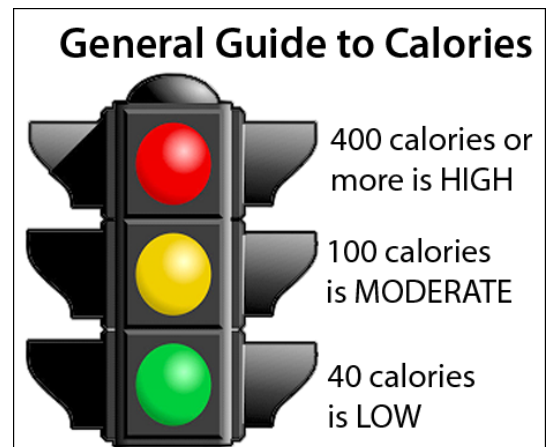
Most of us are interested in the amount of calories in a serving of a food product. When you look at the label of a food product and you see that one serving of the food gives you 15 grams of carbohydrates, you know that you get 60 calories from a serving of that particular food. (That is 15 grams of carbohydrate multiplied by 4 calories for each gram of carbohydrate, or 60 calories.)

**Table 1. Number of calories in grams of food.**

Nutrient	Calories
15 grams of carbohydrates	60
8 grams of protein	32
10 grams of fat	90
5 grams of carbohydrates	20
2 grams of protein	8

When purchasing food you need to look at the label to see if it contains a high, moderate, or low number of calories. If a serving of a food contains 400 calories, it is considered high in calories. Foods that have 100 calories per serving are considered moderate in calories. Servings of food that contain 40 calories are considered low in calories.

Think of the number of calories in a serving of food as a traffic light. If there are 400 calories in a serving of a food, consider this a red light. Stop and think if there is another food that would provide fewer calories. You may want to be cautious if a food contains 100 calories a serving (yellow light). A food with 40 calories a serving should be considered a green light. However, this does not mean you can eat an unlimited amount of a low calorie food. The calories add up.



**NUTRIENTS TO LIMIT**

Use the Nutrition Fact Label to help you limit the nutrients that are less healthy for you.

<b>Total Fat</b> 12g	<b>18%</b>
Saturated Fat 3g	15%
Trans Fat 3g	
<b>Cholesterol</b> 30mg	<b>10%</b>
<b>Sodium</b> 470mg	<b>20%</b>

It is important to limit your intake of saturated fats, trans fat, and cholesterol. Studies have shown that these substances can raise the level of “bad” cholesterol, LDL, in your body. High levels of LDL are associated with heart disease. Health experts recommend that you keep your intake of saturated fat, trans fat and cholesterol as low as possible as part of a nutritionally balanced diet. Read your food label to make sure that your food choices do not contain high amounts of these substances.

Saturated fats are found in fatty meats, whole milk, and whole milk products. Saturated fats cause our bodies to make cholesterol and can lead to heart disease. You need to pay attention to your food labels so that you can know the amount of cholesterol in food.

Trans fats are formed during a process called hydrogenation. In this process, hydrogen is added to vegetable oils to make shortening or margarine, a more solid product. Hydrogenation lengthens the shelf life and improves the flavor and texture of foods.

Foods with trans fats include:

- Vegetable shortening
- Stick margarine
- Snack foods such as, potato, corn, and tortilla chips; candy; packaged or microwave popcorn
- Commercially baked foods such as pastries, doughnuts, cookies
- Deep fried food and snacks

Cholesterol is a waxy substance that is found in all cells of the body and in the blood stream. Cholesterol is needed to help the body function properly; however, the body can make all the cholesterol it needs and does not need the cholesterol we take in with food. High levels of cholesterol (LDL, the bad cholesterol) can lead to heart disease.

Americans generally eat more sodium than they need. Too much sodium in the diet is linked to high blood pressure. Read your food labels to see the amount of sodium that is in the foods you have chosen. Foods low in sodium have less than 140mg of sodium per serving. Practice choosing foods that are low in sodium.

**NUTRIENTS TO GET ENOUGH OF**

Use the Nutrition Fact Label to help you increase healthful nutrients in your diet. Choose foods that are high in fiber, vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium and iron. Foods high in these nutrients protect the body from diseases.

Foods high in dietary fiber, such as whole-grain cereals (avoid those

<b>Dietary Fiber</b> 0g	<b>0%</b>
<b>Vitamin A</b>	<b>4%</b>
<b>Vitamin C</b>	<b>2%</b>
<b>Calcium</b>	<b>20%</b>
<b>Iron</b>	<b>4%</b>

high in sugar), vegetables, fruits, dried peas and beans, protect against diabetes, heart disease, obesity and constipation. Food sources rich in vitamin A protect the eyes and protect the body from infections. Vitamin C is an antioxidant and helps prevent cancer-causing compounds from building up in the body. Calcium is needed for strong bones and teeth and is helpful in preventing osteoporosis. Iron is needed to carry oxygen to the blood cells where energy is made. A lack of iron in the diet leads to fatigue and a condition called anemia.

**THE FOOTNOTE**

The footnote is at the bottom part of the label. This information stays the same from product to product.

The Percent Daily Value tells the percentage of key nutrients one serving of a food provides. These percentages are based on the recommended daily intake for a 2,000 calorie diet.

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**Footnote**

* Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your Daily Values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs.	
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Dietary Fiber	25g 30g

*Use food labels to choose foods high in vitamins, fiber, calcium and iron and limit foods high in saturated and trans fat, cholesterol, and sodium.*

*It is a good idea to look at the ingredient list to see what is in your food. Read the entire label before you make your food choice.*

The Percent Daily Value helps you choose foods that are low in the nutrients you should limit and high in those that you should get enough of. It tells how much of your daily recommendation a serving of the food provides. “Low” is considered to be 5 percent or less.

You want your food choices to be low in each of the following:

- Saturated fat
- Cholesterol
- Trans fat
- Sodium

A percent daily value of 20 percent or more is considered to be “high.” You want your food choices to be high in the following nutrients.

- Dietary fiber
- Vitamin A
- Vitamin C
- Calcium
- Iron

### **INGREDIENTS LIST**

Ingredients are listed on food labels in the order of the amount in the food, from greatest to least. The ingredients that appear first on the list are in the greatest amounts in the food item. It is a good idea to look at the ingredient list to see what is in your food. Some lists of ingredients are very long. This usually means that there are a lot of preservatives in the product. Sometimes the shorter the list of ingredients the better.

### **A COMMON MISCONCEPTION ABOUT FOOD LABELS**

Individuals who are dieting often choose low fat or reduced fat products. It is important to remember that even if a product is low in fat it may be high in carbohydrates (for example, sugar). Even though carbohydrates contain fewer calories than fat, they can still provide a large amount of calories that many consumers do not pay attention to. Read the entire label before you make your food choice.

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